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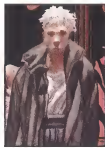
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STORIES

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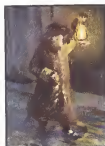
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Brain Damage

Kim Mohan

The idea for this bit of writing started to take shape while I was watching the first presidential debate a couple of nights ago. Although it makes for interesting listening—everybody likes to eavesdrop on an argument—I still find myself getting a little fed up with the game of Dueling Innuendos that these candidates, and all candidates in any major election, seem to think they have to play in order to make themselves look better than the competition.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if one of them would look the camera square in the eye and say, "Yep, you're right, George (or Bill, or Ross). That was a mistake. I'll admit it—I goofed, pure and simple. I shouldn't have said (or done) that, and I knew it afterward. But by then, there was no way I could undo it."

Everybody goofs once in a while, and if the goof is something that other people are bound to notice, the best thing you can do is 'fess up instead of trying to cover up. (I saw ex-President Ford on TV a couple of weeks ago, still trying to justify the verbal blunder he made in a debate sixteen years ago, when he said that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination. Give it up, Jerry.)

When you work in the print media, covering up a mistake usually isn't even an option—because there it is, in literal black and white, tangible and readable. So the only way to deal with it is to acknowledge it and correct it. Which is what I'm about to do . . . a couple of times.

In last month's magazine, we correctly identified Nancy Kress as the winner of the 1991 Hugo Award for Best Novella. The problem is, the story for which she won the award is "Beggars in Spain"—*not* the story I put down next to her name.

It wasn't until a few days ago (as of this writing) that I realized I had goofed. I was thinking about something entirely different, when all of a sudden a terrifying thought stabbed into my head. Have you ever been in the middle of a six-hour plane trip and suddenly remembered that you left the bathtub running at home? That's the kind of feeling that swept over me. I was virtually sure I had screwed up even before going back to check it out, and I knew there was no way I could fix things because the magazine was already rolling off the press.

Why did I make this mistake? I honestly can't say. I *knew* what story had won the award—in fact, I had just finished reading "Beggars in Spain" two days before Nancy was given her Hugo, so it should have been just about the freshest thing in my mind. But when it came time to type out the list of winners for publication in the magazine, my fingers moved over the keys that spelled out "And Wild For to Hold"—Nancy's other nominated story in the category. And my eyes didn't notice that my fingers were pressing the wrong keys.

Clearly, this was a case of what a former colleague of mine used to refer to as "brain damage." Somewhere

up there, a switch stayed open instead of closing, and the neuron carrying the correct bit of information missed the off ramp. Fortunately, the ailment is temporary; unfortunately, its effect is not so transient, because the November issue of this magazine will forever contain that irreversible error. I apologize to Nancy, and to anyone else who was disconcerted or upset after seeing the mistake.

While I'm at it, the record needs to be set straight about an obvious blunder in the October issue. On pages 71–73 of that magazine, we used an article by Gregory Benford called "Nature's Greatest Hits." On page 96, under the "Coming in November" headline, we listed a few of the pieces scheduled for that issue—including . . . you guessed it.

A friend of mine noticed the repetition and wondered, in all sincerity, if Greg was going to be doing a series of articles that all carried the same title. Well, that would have been a fine idea, and a great way for me to squirm out from under this booooo . . . but no. The simple truth is that I did have the article planned for November, but at the last minute we had to make a layout change. I needed to fill three pages, and Greg's piece was just the right size, so in it went—but it didn't occur to me that if I was going to use the story, I had to remove that line from page 96.

The simpler truth is that I suffered another episode of brain damage. Oh, well . . . I never wanted a career in politics anyway. ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Not long ago, editor Kim Mohan and I were discussing some of the writers whose stories had appeared in this magazine during its golden eras of the past—people like Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein, and Theodore Sturgeon. And then the conversation turned to a different group of writers who populated the contents page of *Amazing Stories* during one of the not-so-golden eras of this magazine's long and complicated history—such writers as Alexander Blade, Ivar Jorgensen, Clee Garson, Robert Arnette, and E. K. Jarvis.

Remember them? That great old Alex Blade novel, *The Brain* (*Amazing*, October 1948)? Clee Garson's classic short story, "Let's Give Away Mars!" (April 1951)? Bob Arnette's tremendous two-part serial, "Cosmic Kill" (April and May 1957)? What terrific stories those were! Especially Arnette's "Cosmic Kill," to which I ought to point out in all modesty that I wrote it myself. But I wasn't the author of Arnette's equally fine tale, "Empire of Evil," to which "Cosmic Kill" was the sequel. Paul Fairman wrote that one. Nor can I take credit for Robert Arnette's ingenious "The Unfinished Equation," which appeared in the April 1952 issue of *Amazing*'s old companion magazine, *Fantastic Adventures*. Roger Graham wrote that one.

You see, Alexander Blade, Ivar Jorgensen, Robert Arnette, and all the rest of the gang were pseudonyms. What's more, they weren't pseudonyms of any one particular

writer. They were "house names"—owned and operated by the publishers. All sorts of writers took turns at being Alexander Blade and E. K. Jarvis—often with some odd and ironic results.

The quaint custom of using house names goes back into the ancient days of the pulp-magazine era. In that far-off time, before paperbacks, before television, fiction magazines by the hundreds covered the newsstands all the time, some of them appearing as frequently as once a week. They represented the various categories of popular fiction that still exist—science fiction, horror stories, westerns, mysteries—but there were dozens of pulps that provided fiction for very specialized tastes indeed. Would you believe *Zeppelin Stories*? *Wall Street Stories*? *Saucy Stories*? *Jungle Stories*? *Oriental Stories*? *Pirate Stories*? *Railroad Stories*? *Submarine Stories*? *Gangster Stories*? Each of those was the name of a magazine that actually existed—though sometimes not for very long—in the 1920's and 1930's.

The men who wrote the fiction for these magazines—they were nearly all men—were, by and large, a hard-drinking, hard-working crew who banged out thousands of words a day. They had to, because the payment was very low, usually a penny or two a word (though some of the superstars commanded a nickel a word). A 10,000-word pulp story, therefore, would bring a writer \$100 from one of the lesser pulps,

\$200 or \$250 from one of the top-of-the-line outfits. That was good money in an era when \$25 a week was considered a decent salary; but you had to keep at it steadily, week in and week out, to earn a consistent living. I know, because I arrived on the fiction-writing scene right at the end of this era, in the mid-1950's, and earned my own living for a while writing for the last few surviving pulps. It involved an awful lot of swift typing.

Some writers stood up very well under the grueling pace. Others burned out or periodically had to be sent away to dry out. And so some of the magazines, for the sake of presenting a consistent product to their readership, fell into the habit of creating pseudonyms for their best-known story series. The "Doc Savage" stories that were featured in *Doc Savage Magazine* were bylined "Kenneth Robeson." The "Shadow" series in the magazine of the same name bore the byline "Maxwell Grant." Most of the time "Grant" was really a writer named Walter Gibson, and "Kenneth Robeson" 's stories were done by Lester Dent. But not always. Others who turned out *Shadow* material as "Grant" included Robert Hart Davis, Bruce Elliott, Theodore Tinsley, and even Lester Dent of *Doc Savage*. As for the *Doc Savage* stuff, it was written over the years not only by Dent but by people like Norman Danberg, Alan Hathaway, and Paul Ernst.

The early sf magazines—*Amazing*

Stories, *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories*—didn't make use of the house-name system. The science-fiction writers were proud of their work and wanted full credit for it. But in 1938, when *Amazing* came under the ownership of Ziff-Davis Publications of Chicago, new editor Ray Palmer instituted a policy much closer to that of the traditional pulp magazines. Most of the fiction, he decided, would be written by a small group of regulars, generally based in the Chicago area, who would each turn in a specified quantity of word-age each month. Whatever they wrote would be purchased, so long as they maintained a certain minimum level of quality—and, since they were old pros, that was just what they did. It usually wasn't much more than minimum, but it was adequate quick entertainment for an undemanding audience.

The original group of Ziff-Davis writers included such men as David Wright O'Brien, David Vern, Don Wilcox, Dwight V. Swain, William P. McGivern, Robert Moore Williams, and Leroy Yerxa. Some of them went off to war (O'Brien was killed in it) and others, like McGivern, drifted away to become successful novelists. New writers were needed, and so came Chester Geier, Roger Graham, Paul Fairman, and Milton Lesser. Still later—in the 1950's, when Ziff-Davis had moved its headquarters to New York and the magazines (*Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic*) had undergone a change in editorship—Randall Garrett, Harlan Ellison, and a very young Robert Silverberg joined the roster.

With a small group of prolific writers turning out anywhere up to 50,000 words a month for these magazines (they were huge at first—*Amazing*, in 1942, was a hefty 276 pages), pseudonyms were needed to disguise the fact that just a few peo-

ple were producing most of the stories. So David Wright O'Brien wrote under the names of "Clee Garson," "John York Cabot," and "Duncan Farnsworth." Vern's pen names were "David V. Reed" and "Alexander Blade." Yerxa was "Elroy Arno" and "Richard Casey." Williams's alter egos included "E. K. Jarvis" and "Russell Storm." And so on.

But as the writers came and went, readers missed old favorites, even if they weren't real. Editor Palmer began passing the existing pseudonyms around, turning them into house names. Vern had stopped writing science fiction, but "Alexander Blade" marched on—his material written by McGivern, Yerxa, Wilcox, and many others, including, eventually, yours truly. The same thing happened with "Clee Garson." Ditto "E. K. Jarvis" and some of the others. To this day, no one is completely sure who wrote what, and even the surviving writers have forgotten—believe me, I've lost track of some of my own.

Paul Fairman, who joined the staff of Ziff-Davis regulars in 1949, attracted much attention with a story in *Fantastic Adventures* called "Whom the Gods Would Slay" (June 1951) under the pseudonym of "Ivar Jorgensen." Other "Jorgensen" stories followed, all by Fairman. In 1952 he went off to become the first editor of a new magazine called *If*, and he took his pen name with him: the March 1953 issue of *If* contained a story by Ivar, now spelled "Jorgenson," probably by accident. But "Jorgenson" under the old spelling had won a wide following at *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, and stories under that name continued to appear there all through the 1950's—some of them by Fairman, some by other hands. (The "Jorgensen" story called "O Captain My Captain" in the August 1956 issue of *Fantastic* was my work.)

To make things even more con-

fusing, other magazines began appropriating Ziff-Davis house names. William Hamling, a former Ziff-Davis editor, started his own magazine, *Imagination*, in the early 1950's and began publishing Alexander Blade and Ivar Jorgensen/Jorgenson material too. (I wrote some of it. One of those appeared with one spelling of the name on the contents page and the other on the story.) And when Larry T. Shaw, who had never worked for Ziff-Davis, began to edit *Science Fiction Adventures* in 1956, he too asked me to write Blade and Jorgenson stories. Thus, what had been one writer's pseudonym and then a Ziff-Davis house name passed into the public domain, to the annoyance of the original proprietor. I had a novel published as "Ivar Jorgenson"; Paul Fairman had several published around the same time as "Ivar Jorgensen." I still get requests to autograph some of the Fairman books.

The irony of all this for me is that I knew nothing about the house-name system when I began reading *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures* in 1948. I loved a lot of Alexander Blade's stuff, and when Jorgensen made his debut a couple of years later I admired his early stories greatly. I was, of course, still in my teens. By 1956 I had graduated to the ranks of professional writers, and I knew the secret. And now Alexander Blade and Ivar Jorgensen/Jorgenson were my pen names too! What a swift transformation! I had started out as one of Alexander Blade's most avid fans . . . and within eight years I had turned into him.

All ancient history now. House names are extinct, and scarcely anyone remembers the old custom of passing them around to a bunch of assorted writers. Which is why I thought I'd set this reminiscence down, just for the record. ♦

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Letters

Dear editor:

Barry N. Malzberg's column, "Thus Our Words Unspoken" (September 1992), is a very important contribution to our current national debate. It's not hard to come up with further examples of "taboo" premises:

- There really *is* an international Jewish conspiracy, which profited from the Great Depression and caused the Gulf War.
- Intelligence *is* determined by race.

Science, as well as art, has "taboos." Forty years ago social scientists were studying whether race determines intelligence (after all, it determines so many other things), but today, responsible scholars mostly ignore them. And that's a good thing. Even assuming that valid and unambiguous results could be obtained (likelihood zero, in my opinion), the results would be distorted both by people who want the answer to be "yes" and by those who want it to be "no," making a bad social situation worse.

Such examples of restraint in science are useful examples for the arts. Nowadays, artists translate "restraint" into "self-censorship" and dismiss it without a thought. I was disappointed at Mr. Malzberg's conclusion that people *should* write stories based on "sensitive" topics. As long as I am not the only person on the planet, I have very few rights that need not be tempered with responsibility. Free speech without sensitivity becomes a fart at the dinner table.

[By the way #1, I wonder if Mr. Malzberg has read "Seduction of the Innocent" by Frederick Wertham. I did, thirty years (?) ago as a twentysomething, and I still remember one picture, taken from a comic book, of a young woman tied to a chair with her legs spread (covered by

a skirt, of course, but all the more stimulating for that) and a man holding a hot poker aimed . . . well, the caption said something like, "Twelve-year-old children had no problem describing what the man was going to do with the poker." The Comics Code was a good thing, and a valuable model for all the arts.]

[By the way #2: Le Guin's marvelous "The Rock That Changed Things" was a brilliant choice for the lead-off story in the issue containing Malzberg's article.]

Jess Schilling
Huntingdon PA

Dear Mr. Mohan:

I read Mr. Silverberg's July column with plenty of sympathy. His grandmother-in-law is in a really harrowing state, a state that trickles down to all her relations, including Mr. S. But I think his emotion has led him astray in his complaint. His grandmother's state could have been avoided had she executed a Living Will and a limited power of attorney authorizing someone she trusted to suspend treatment when her course became unendurable. Almost certainly the reason this did not happen is (a) having to face your own death in this way is a sobering experience, more than many people can bear, and (b) it settles the responsibility on a family member, not on some strange doctor who is a convenient receptacle for anger. Mr. Silverberg is also unjust when he implies that the sole reason doctors and hospitals strive to keep patients like his grandmother alive is profit. He should know that most of the "profit" on such patients that is not drained away by regulations is used to subsidize care for the indigent. This is the U.S.'s default policy in the absence

of a national health plan. It is a messy plan, full of callousness, though I'm not sure that any other plan I've heard of would be much better in its overall price.

Greg Koster
Tacoma WA

Dear Kim:

Why the defensive editorial? ("I Really Don't Get It," July 1992) I find it hard to believe people are giving you a hard time about giving a personalized response. Would they rather receive the form letters a lot of other places send out? If someone can't take a rejection, especially a personalized one, they shouldn't be sending their stuff out. I've had four stories accepted elsewhere, but you're still the first one I send my favorites to, because I know that even if you reject them, you'll tell me the reason why, and that in itself is payment for my efforts.

Robert Silverberg's column in the July issue was a good one. He brings up a lot of important points, focusing on a problem that deserves attention. The only thing I wish he would have added was information on the Hospice movement, which is one viable solution to the problems he discusses. Hospices focus on providing comfort to terminally ill patients in a setting which allows for a maximum of dignity and respect for the afflicted. Anyone who wants more information on Hospices can call one of these numbers: 1-800-658-8898 (referrals only) 1-703-243-5900 (information & referrals)

The Hospice movement is a caring and valid alternative to our society's "struldubug syndrome."

Kevin Carr
Honolulu HI



Chimaera

Barry B. Longyear



Illustration by
Janet Aulisio

That night I was in the dead zone on the unpaved end of 97th at Keegan's warehouse. I was looking for a particular kind of work. It was illegal work, since my andy psych tech ticket had been pulled. It was also illegal for anyone to hire me to hunt bugs in their andys for the same reason, which is why I was job-hunting in the dead zone. Business and professional law didn't often reach down to that part of the city. For all that mattered, neither did any other kind of law.

I'd gotten a line on Keegan from a snatcher named Molls. Molls said Keegan was a head-knocker making ends meet by snatching and reclaiming illegal junker andys. He also said that Keegan's last ferret had mented out trying to reclaim an unreclaimable andy that had freaked and had begun killing and stacking humans. I slipped Molls a few to arrange a meet with his fellow snatcher.

Eddy Keegan was built like a wild pig: short, solid, and with bristles for hair. Instead of tusks, however, he had short gray teeth that looked like they'd been ground down by a perpetually tense jaw. "You the ferret?" he asked as his forehead wrinkled above eyes that never seemed to move.

"My name's Shannon."

He studied me for a second and said, "Somebody broke your nose, Shannon." He cocked his head toward the warehouse. "Come on. I'll show you the shop."

The interview was over. He was a pig with a paycheck and I was a ferret with a broken nose. We made a perfect couple.

Once inside the warehouse, Keegan threw on a light revealing a makeshift bio bay and corpse cooler mounted on the bed of a truck. The bio bay was a bassinet for androids designed to bring them up or down from temp and to hold them during things like operations and mental pipe-cleaning. Its opaque plastic screens needed cleaning.

Next to the bay was a table where I'd be stretched out to do my work. In between the bay and the table was an ancient D-11 meld and PS unit, the psychosurgery modules missing from their ports. It was set up strictly for becoming and communicating. "Okay, Shannon," said Keegan. "That your real name? Shannon?"

"For now." I pointed at the meld unit's dull green plastic case. "How old is that D-11?"

"It was made in the thirties, but the power unit and main boards are only a couple of years old. Don't worry about it. It works."

"Who's going to operate?"

"Me." Keegan grinned. "I been doing this stuff for a long time. I can find my way through the knobs."

I faced him and folded my arms across my chest. "I heard the last ferret that plugged that unit into his head is still singing Mairzy Doats and yanking out his scrotum hairs."

Keegan shrugged his shoulders and held out a hand. "It's a dangerous business. You want job security and a health plan, Shannon, go uptown and peddle life insurance. You want fast coin, you come down here. Let me see your plug."

I turned around and pushed the hair up off my neck. I could feel Keegan's fingers pull the plastic protector off the connection port, along with a hair or two. "Easy," I said.

"Good. This unit's got an adapter that fits a DX connector. How come you still got your pins? I thought when they pull your ticket they snip your pins."

"Not always," I answered. There was a long silence as Keegan waited for an explanation. I leveled my gaze at his reflection in the bio bay screen. "If your license is suspended for mental reasons," I said, "they don't remove the connector." I smiled inwardly at the irony of my next statement. "Just in case they need it to fix your own head."

"You're a ment?" Keegan's eyes squinted as he chewed on an unlit cigar. "Don't know about a psycho ferret in the shop, Shannon. You could freak or something, right?"

"You can bet I'll freak if you smoke that cabbage and run the board at the same time."

"I ain't foolin', Shannon."

"Neither am I." I smoothed down my hair and turned back. "Sure, I could freak. In fact, I could do that right now, Keegan. I might be teetering on the brink of a psychotic episode. You turning me down could be just the thing that finally drives me over the edge."

"Funny." Keegan thrust his hands into his jacket pockets as he forced a chuckle. Maybe he hoped I was joking. Maybe I was. I wasn't so sure myself. I pointed toward the corpse cooler.

"Look, if what you had in there was clean, you could hire a ferret with good papers and a threaded head, if you had the money. Instead you got an andy with a bad smell, I've had a few ticks in my world plan, and I work for a percentage of sales. Now, are you going to let my emotional health stand in the way of your money?"

As always with honest criminals, the appeal to economic reason prevailed. He climbed the stairs to the back of the truck, took me into the cooler, and showed me the racks designed for holding biodroids in near stasis. Four of the twelve racks were occupied.

"You need to know where I got 'em?"

I shook my head as I shivered in the cold. "What I don't know I can't tell. I need to know diags, though." I nodded toward the occupied racks. "They look in pretty good shape. Are they just mented out?"

"One of 'em needs his guts sewed back together. This one." He pointed to the one andy in a body bag, his bandaged middle visible through the clear wrapper. "When he freaked and killed his boss and half his gang, he got stitched across his guts. It's just plumbing, but fixing it's going to cost a pile or two. I been holding off on the operation to see if someone can get his head straight first. The other three are strictly ments. The bodies are top grade." He pointed toward the back of the cooler. "Look at this one, Shannon. A hooker. Maybe you heard about her on the news a couple months ago. Her name's Meyla. She killed three men and a woman in a hotel on Flag Street."

He walked over to one of the racks, the ice mists in the cooler swirling about his legs. He bent over and

pointed at the naked form in the rack, its skin glistening with vapor block and ice crystals. It was a race-neutral female on a standard Holt bio frame. When the folks at Holt tossed her code into the vat, they were building a whore.

What must it be like, I thought, to be born a whore? The shape, the look, the attitude. Born to do it; born to be fulfilled by it. I'd find out soon enough when I walked the hiding places in her mind. Keegan ran his fingers up the inside of the android's leg and I automatically jerked his arm away from her.

Keegan's face cranked into a confused frown. "What the hell's wrong with you?" He pulled his powerful arm out of my grasp. "She's out of it. It's nothin' to her. What's it to you?"

A wave of nausea and light-headedness passed. I couldn't peg the feeling. I averted my gaze and shook my head. "Look, if you expect me to climb into that bio's head and have a chance of fixing whatever's wrong, get your jollies some other way. Buy a balloon with tits and a jug of salad oil."

Keegan's face became very red. "Look, man, I don't make it coping feels off andys in the freezer. Got that?" He pointed at the android with his thumb. "What's it to her anyway? She's programmed to be a prosti."

"If she was all that happy being a whore, Keegan, maybe those four jokers she killed would still be alive."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, she's out now."

"We're never out, Keegan. Not us; not the andys. Unless we're dead, something always remembers. Feelings. Senses. The body. The body remembers."

"Crap." He had just waved his hand dismissing the whole thing when I raised my fist as if to punch his jaw straight through his rat's brain to the back of his head. Immediately he hunched down and put up his own fists as his eyes widened in fright.

"The body remembers, Keegan." I waved a finger at him as I grinned. "The body always remembers."

The first android I plugged was the one with the shot-up guts. If my ferreting job was successful, Keegan would bring in a shadow cutter to fix the andy's plumbing. The biodroid's name was Alex Shields, and it was an Akagi Combat Systems Seventeen installed in a cauc male wrap. It had been illegally modified and used as a hitter in one or more murders by the city powder elite. After Shields did in boss Ricky Curtain and a few of his soldiers, the number two hood managed to have his goons do Alex and dump him. The do, however, wasn't done well enough, so after he was dumped he fell into the hands of Big Blue. After that, the authorities ordered the andy junked. On the way to the death and disposal yard, however, Eddy Keegan dropped a few dollars in the proper hands and bodysnatched Alex hoping to repair and resell the biodroid to a bargain hunter. Alex would be just the thing to watch the children or take Fido out for a walk.

If it had been safe for me to enter Alex Shields's mind, he wouldn't have been ordered junked. Instead he would've been repaired. But then there wouldn't be any work for me.

To fix a shutdown piece you don't simply open its lid and replace a couple of boards. They aren't machines. They're genetically programmed biological beings. But sometimes, just as with humans, there are problems. To fix one of them you climb into its psychological frame of reference, walk its mental corridors, and deal with whatever it refuses to deal with. I'd gotten a few frights and starts since getting my ticket. In the main, though, android brain boos are feeble things next to the drool-dripping monsters that stalk human minds.

I walked down the gleaming steel hallway of Alex Shields's psychological frame of reference, my eyes searching the darkened doorways, my feet making no sound. The absolute silence heightened my anxiety; brought those shadowy things from my past too close to the light. I needed the silence. It was a place of metal corridors, halls, and passages. Akagi units usually mentate in terms of metal hallways. Infinite conduits to infinite compartments, and the piece was hiding somewhere in one or more of those compartments. If it called, I needed the silence to hear it. It might call. Those who hide from the world or themselves usually want to be found.

The opening to my left was a nothingness. The piece had never driven a thought through there. In the piece's universe, then, it did not exist. I took a deep breath and listened to the air rushing into my nostrils.

Another opening. Another nothingness. None of these neuron banks had been used. Sector one-eleven should've shown some use in a unit as old as this one. The piece must've jammed early; soon after being modified. I had yet to uncover any sign of the modification.

Another opening, this one leading to another steel corridor lined with more openings leading to more nothingness. We weren't even near the right sector.

"Keegan," I called, "move me over to the main track, back to sector seventy-one." My voice sounded tinny in the metal corridor, the echoes clack together.

"*You ain't found him yet?*" Keegan's booming voice deafened me.

"No, I ain't found him yet. How about turning down the audio?"

The feedback yowls decreased, and less of Keegan's amplitude returned with, "*Sorry. You gonna be much longer, Shannon?*"

"Maybe."

"*If you need to cut and stitch to hurry things up, I got the surgery modules.*"

"I'm not qualified to do psych surgery, Keegan."

"*The way I read the rules, Shannon, you're not qualified to be doing what you're doing right now.*"

"Eat it."

"*How much longer?*"

"It depends on where he's hiding, and that depends on where he's been. Right now I don't have a clue. Move me over to seventy-one."

"*I have to go take a leak.*"

"So go. Just move me to seventy-one first."

"*Okay. Give me a sec.*"

The crackle of Keegan's voice filled the android's universe. "*Seventy-one coming up. Ready?*"

"Go ahead."

Another steel corridor, except the deck of this one writhed with cables; black, glistening, alive. There was a wind blowing so hard that it blinded me. "Keegan!" I hollered. "Keegan, you jerk! Get me out of here! This isn't seventy-one! Keegan?"

Keegan had gone to relieve himself, leaving me lost in the andy's mind. The force of the wind blew me back against a doorway. It was partway open, the hinges corroded. I pushed against the door until it was open far enough to see a corridor filled with blood-red light.

Blood. That was the color of guilt in the Akagi universe. Guilt was the scent leading to the event that tripped all the circuit breakers. I stepped through the opening, the sounds of the wind dying to low, ghostly moans. Then it was silent. I could hear hissing, something raking its claws across the hot metal deck.

As my guts wrapped into a knot, I whispered to myself, "I am the traveler, I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real." Affirm, affirm, affirm. It was always at such times that I remembered my fellow student ferret in psych school, Alisa, who used to say, "I am a cow, I am a cow, I am a cow, doesn't make me a bloody damned cow!"

"I am the traveler, I have control," I repeated. A part of me reminded myself that all of the control I had was off somewhere taking a leak.

"Keegan?" No answer. Again the hissing.

I approached the blackness of an open doorway. The hissing, the sounds of the claws, came from it. Flames fled the entrance as the thing roared like a lion. The flames died, and I saw its eyes reflecting bright green at me. Its great yellow fangs were glistening with drool. It came closer, and my heart thumped against my ribs. As it emerged into the full light, I saw first the lion's head, the goat's body, the tail of the dragon.

I laughed. It was the Chimaera. The mythological patron of the android psych techs. It was one of our first exercises back in school.

It blew flames and roared again as I looked in one black doorway after another. Alex Shields had been searched by a ferret before. That particular rendering of a chimaera was to be found in no available memory depository. The image had to have been planted there by, or taken from, a previous ferret.

Just to be on the safe side I closed my eyes and called in my own frame of reference. The steel corridor became a street, the doorways became row houses, and the chimaera was a piece of a broken machine on the sidewalk, its clockwork mechanism twitching an arm as it wound down.

"How's it going?" Keegan's voice.

"Check your board, Keegan. I don't know where the hell you dropped me, but it's not sector seventy-one."

I let myself flow back into the android's blood-red corridor guarded by the chimaera. *"The seven-key must've stuck. You're in seven seventy-one. You find anything yet?"*

"Yeah. I found something. Maybe this piece has gone multiple. Mark this point so we can find it again." I moved past the chimaera and continued down the corridor.

"What're you talking about, Shannon?"

"Did you mark that point like I told you?"

"Yeah. But what's going on?"

"Alex Shields is a multiple, just like with a human. To survive the unsurvivable, the piece's psyche busted into a number of personalities, some of them taking a piece of the event to carry, some of them taking a piece of the original personality to hide away for safekeeping. To do the fix we have to find all the pieces and put them back together again."

There was a long silence; then Keegan asked, *"Is it going to take long?"*

"Maybe. I've seen as many as nineteen distinct personalities in a single bio. I think the record is over a hundred." I saw a shape move in the distance. It was a small dog standing with one paw raised as though it had been injured. "I think I see another piece. What's the level?"

"First level, about eight hundred into it. You're heading two-sixty."

I changed modes to the schematic implant for the Akagi C-17 and plotted the blood-red color, the chimaera, and the dog on the three-dimensional grid. There were trillions of possible locations for the pieces of Alex Shields's personality, but some locations were more probable than others. The guilt streak was along seven seventy-one's first level west. That was the gray edge between DNA-programmed centers, neural processing, and open memory. In humans it's the invisible dividing line between primitive instinct and learned behavior. I plotted it and sent identification pulses across to adjacent conduits.

The red had spread to nine other paths, but they were all heading in the same direction, and seven seventy-one appeared to be the hottest in that region.

I returned to the Akagi frame of reference and started as the chimaera roared fire at me and snapped its fear-some jaws at my leg. "Go on. Get out of here," I told it. "You aren't real."

It stood there, a quizzical look in its eyes as tiny wisps of smoke rose from the corners of its mouth. I walked over to it, extended my hand, and scratched the top of its lion's head. "You're not real, but I know how you feel."

Leaving the monster behind watching me, I came upon the wounded dog. It was a honey-colored spaniel with only one eye. The socket of the other eye crawled with maggots. The dog whined and I squatted down and extended my hand. It sniffed my fingers, then licked them, then bit them. I jerked back my hand missing my index and middle fingers. "Hungry little bastard." As I watched, my fingers reappeared. "Keegan, I'm at the second piece. Mark it."

"I got it."

There were doorways to the sides. I looked into the left one first. The room swirled with a hypnotic vortex of hot psychedelic colors. I could see nothing but the colors. Stepping into the vortex, I fought to keep a balance that had no meaning as the turquoise and hot pinks streaked through the electric blues, blacks, and blinding

whites. The universe whirled about me, making me dizzy, and I changed to my own frame of reference.

Again I was on the street, my heart racing. There were people on the sidewalk, coming toward me, walking away, no one standing and watching. The houses lining the filthy street were those rotting row houses from my youth. Once great mansions, they were now infected with late-stage urban decay. All of the front-door landings were chest-high above street level, reached by chipped, cracked, filthy masonry stairs. I walked the street and searched my frame of reference for the corresponding thing that had been represented by the vortex in Alex Shields's guilt track.

"You back here, Mick?"

It was Colly Fry: gang leader, sadist, and terror of my youth. But he was not real.

"Piss off, Colly."

"I told you I'd kill you the next time you came back."

"Yeah, Colly, and you said the same thing the last hundred or so times I've been back. You and the chimaera. Evaporate."

"I told you I'd kill you, Mick."

I shook my head, appalled at how ordinary my symbols were. "Tell me something, Colly. Is the real you still alive?"

Colly's face twisted into a frown. "The real me?"

"Yeah. You're just a few regrettable electrochemical relationships along a well-traveled rut. What about the real you? Is Colly Fry still on the street? The real you has to be almost fifty by now. Is the real you still alive?"

The hurt, confused, stupid image of Colly Fry faded away, leaving me empty, brushed with guilt. I still had some old business left with the real Colly. It was vague in my memory, but he had beaten me, humiliated me, shamed me. The hundreds of times I had mentally killed him hadn't caused his death. He still lived where I had buried him alive: my mind.

Somehow, just at that moment, there seemed to be something terribly wrong about the memory of Colly Fry; something wrong about the street.

I heard a whimper, and I thought for a moment that the wounded dog had escaped from the biodroid's universe and followed me into my personal frame of reference. But my street had plenty of wounded dogs of its own. Wounded dogs, wounded children.

Huddled in the shadow of the steps leading up to a dingy yellow tenement house was a small child, a boy of four or five. The whimper had come from him. Something was wrong.

"Keegan?"

"Yeah?"

"Where are the field levels?"

There was a pause then Keegan's voice came back at me. *"All field readouts are in the blue, Shannon. The whole board is blue. What's up?"*

"I'm not sure."

"You want me to pull you out?"

"Not just yet."

The little boy. He shouldn't have been part of the android's universe. Andys are created full grown. Alex

Shields had never been a little boy. There was no reason for him to symbolize with such an image. I took myself back to Alex Shields's universe and was immediately caught up in the swirling vortex. It sucked at me, drew me irresistibly toward its center, and in the heart of it there appeared no colors but row upon endless row of sharp teeth. I covered my eyes and took myself back to the familiar street; the place where I knew enough about everything to be safe.

The vortex was the boy. The boy was looking at me with eyes I knew. Deep blue eyes filled with pain. Full cheeks streaked with tears. His head crowned with a halo of fine, almost white hair. His knees were pulled up to his chest and his arms were wrapped about his tiny body.

He frightened me. I knew he was not real, yet he terrified me. I knew him. I knew him well enough to know that he would stubbornly refuse to answer my question. "What's your name?" I asked.

He curled up into a tighter ball and turned his face away from me, toward the safety of the filthy steps. My fear married to an ache in my heart that was as big as the sky. Real or not, that boy and his pain pulled at me.

I walked over to him and came to a stop half a step away. He was an alien; the alien that I somehow knew. I squatted down. His eyes looked at me, hating me, hoping that I would rescue him, damning me for betraying him, begging me to kill him, praying for me to gather him in my arms and hold him.

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me."

"You won't do anything," he sobbed.

"I will. I promise."

"You won't do anything."

I held out my hands. "I can do everything. Here I can do everything. What do you want?"

There was a low growl from deep within the building. The boy winced, his head twitching slightly as his neck muscles tensed. "You'll run!" cried the boy. "You'll run! You always run!"

"No," I protested, but the little boy scrambled to his feet and ran down the sidewalk. As I stood, the growl from inside the house grew louder, lower, more menacing. My breath was shallow; the skin on the back of my neck tingled.

There wasn't any reason to go into that house. No reason of mine. Only a figment of an android's imagination had accused me of running; accused me of betraying him; accused me of being a coward. And there was nothing to fear. I was the traveler. I was in control. All was symbol. Nothing was real.

I walked to the base of the steps and looked up into the blackness of that open doorway. A chill, fetid odor came rolling over the sill, down the stairs toward me. Earth, rot, feces, perfume. Sick and sweet.

I whispered to myself, "I am the traveler, I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real." Affirm, affirm, affirm.

I took one hesitant step toward the stairs, and the entire front of the building exploded in a roar of flames, deafening me, blinding me, burning my face and hands.

The smoke cleared.

I could see it standing where the building used to be.

Four stories tall, roaring fire, acid dripping from its great fangs. The chimaera.

"You," I began, my mouth too dry to speak. "You are not real—"

It leaped at me, opened its huge jaws and devoured me, the street, my universe. "You are not real!" I yelled as the great jaws crushed my spine. In the distance I could hear the boy screaming. He was alone. I knew I should've been there with him. I had betrayed him again.

Everything filled with black; silence without end.

I walked my dreams, the chimaera again small and harmless. The chimaera, an impossible monster, an impossible and foolish creation of the imagination. From where had it come? That was years ago in Danvers, north of Boston's great armpit. At Nimura Intel, android psychological technician orientation.

"We chase electrochemical bugs," said Art Rankin, visiting speaker from Akagi Artificial Intelligence. "Bugs are mind creations, illusions, dreams. In androids it works the same way it works in humans: a contradiction, gap, or other error in the bioprogram. Find the error, fix it, and you get a gold star."

But there were dangers about which the man from Akagi warned us. The causes of the errors are sometimes real, sometimes not. The bugs, however, are always not real. They are only representations of the errors. "When those giant snakes, machine monsters, and one-eyed, drool-dripping horrors come at you, they will sure as hell seem real, though," he warned.

We were assigned images that we would never fail to recognize upon sight. One of them was the chimaera. It was an outlandish-looking thing, and the double meaning amused me at the time. "Represent the most threatening errors with your preselected images," said the man from Akagi. "That way you will always be able to recognize them for what they are: nothing."

Nothing.

How bad "nothing" invaded my safe place?

How bad "nothing" eaten me alive?

Awake.

I was on my back, the surface beneath me hard, unyielding, gritty with filth. Before I opened my eyes I lifted my arm and reached my fingers to the base of my skull behind my right ear. The connection port was vacant. The plastic cap hadn't been replaced, but I was disconnected.

I opened my eyes and found myself on the floor of the warehouse next to the truck. The android, Alex Shields, was seated in an old plastic chair, his elbows on the armrests, his fingers intertwined. He was dressed in what looked like a set of Keegen's discarded baggy pseudoleathers. His eyes were open but I could read no expression on his face. He looked done in, which was a vast improvement over a few hours before when he was done for.

"Where's Keegan?" I asked.

Alex Shields winced as he changed his position in the chair and cocked his head toward the door. "He went home around three, right after the doctor finished closing me."

"Is that why I'm on the floor?"

"The cutter needed the table. He didn't want to bend over."

I pushed myself up on my elbows, my head spinning. "Me on the floor and you with your guts just stitched, and he just left us?"

The android nodded. "The health plan in this plant really sucks."

I sat up the rest of the way. A sick headache flowed into my skull and sloshed against the top of my brain pan. As a wave of nausea followed the headache, I closed my eyes against the glare of the lights. "Shields? Your operation. You got much pain?"

"There wasn't any pain during the operation. The cutter used local nerve blocks. They expired some time ago." Andys were designed to manage pain well, which is more than I could say for my own unit.

"What about your head?" I asked.

"My head?"

"Before I wiped out, I saw that you'd gone multiple. At least three, maybe four, personalities."

The android shifted position in the chair, the move causing him some pain. "Right now I'm me, my nervous system seems to be up to specs, and I'm looking at the world through regulation lenses."

What a load of crap. Did the andy think I was the incarnation of the original mushroom boy? I'd never even gotten to the andy's illegal modification. I was sure there was more to do, but right then I was too ragged to press it.

I looked at my watch, slightly surprised that Keegan hadn't taken it. The time was 4:23 in the morning. I looked back at the andy. "Okay, so why are you sitting there watching me?"

"To see if you live or die."

"Die?"

Alex Shields winced as he nodded again. "The cutter said you had a psychoseizure of some kind, with maybe a one in four chance of not coming out of it."

"And they left me on the damn floor?"

"They couldn't register you at the local hospital, could they? Doctors with clean coats ask too many questions. If you died or went veg, I was supposed to stick your body in the cooler."

"Keegan's just a sentimental slob, isn't he? So what now?"

"I go home with you. I need a place to stay."

"Did Keegan say that?"

"I did. I need a spot to park."

I leaned a hand against the truck and struggled to my feet. "What in the hell makes you think I'd take you to my place?"

Alex Shields leveled his unblinking gaze at me. "Has Keegan paid you for your work on me?"

"No."

"I'm your collateral, Shannon. Give me a hand up and help's go."

We helped crip each other to my walkup on 91st. It was a bedroom-bathroom thing, change your own bed, fresh towels every five days, fresh paint every millennium. The pig at the desk picked his nose and smirked as I paid him a couple to bring a cot and some extra bedclothes up to my room.

In the room the andy undressed and went right to bed. I caught a glimpse of his middle before he went under the covers and he was wrapped like a mummy. Here and there blood had seeped through the bandages, and no one appeared to have cleaned up anything after the operation. Spatters of blood were on his shoulders and legs. The blood spots shocked me for a moment; then the moment passed. It wasn't important. Andys were designed to be infection-resistant.

I left a light on in the bathroom, lay down on the bed fully dressed, and watched the room in the half-light. Every muscle was stretched tight. Outside, the gray light of dawn was already fighting its way through the grime on the windows. I felt as though I was suffocating. I was tired enough to sleep for a week, but I knew there would be no sleep until the andy dozed off.

I always had to be the last to fall asleep. I knew no reason for it. That's the way it had always been. I had to be certain that everyone else was asleep before I could sleep. In screening for psych tech school they had asked me if I had any sleep disorders. I answered no. When I was asleep, I slept. The dozen or so times I would wake during the night were awake disorders. That's the way I figured it. I also figured if I had any head problems I'd be screened out, and I needed the job.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the sounds of the city traffic vibrating the room's thin walls and windows. The image of the giant chimera came into my mind, and I felt myself frown at the memory.

What was it? It was supposed to be my representation of the most fearful of Alex Shields's monsters. What could it have been? Shields had gone multiple, and one of those personalities had already been represented by the chimera. Small, puny, cute chimera. Where had that giant monster been hiding?

"Having trouble sleeping, Shannon?"

My eyes opened. "What's it to you?" The room was silent for a moment and then I asked him, "Shields, what's your big fear?"

There was a pause. When the andy answered, his voice was flat, emotionless. "The same as everyone else: staying alive too long."

"I'm talking about fear, not philosophical hairballs." I pushed myself up into a sitting position. "What's that monster in your head, andy? The monster I saw. What is it?"

"You mean that thing with the lion's head and the dragon's tail? Isn't that one of yours?"

"The image is mine. The chimera is mine, but what it represented is yours. What did it represent? Your big terror, Shields, your big secret. What is it?"

"I don't know. Aren't you supposed to tell me? 'Maybe.' I leaned back on my pillow. 'Maybe it'll take another run through your head. Maybe you're okay enough to sell as is. You seem to be functioning okay, but tomorrow I'll run you through the test battery to make certain.'"

I didn't hear anything from the andy. The poison of loneliness sickened the moment. The andy was inside the room, but I was one of those who could find loneliness in a packed stadium. The andy's voice was better than no voice at all. "That little boy, Shields, the one with the almost white hair?"

"I saw him."

"What does he represent?"

The andy's head rolled over and he looked at me. "I'm an android. I've never been a little boy. I think he might be one of yours." There was more than a touch of sarcasm in the words.

I ground the answer between my lobes. Mine? My own crap was spilling into the andy's trash? My memories of being a little boy were fragmented and few. I ran from the idea, but there was nothing else that made sense. The little boy was mine, and he wasn't one of my preselected images. He was something new.

The andy gasped as he rolled to his side, his face to the wall. After a moment he said, "Shannon?"

"What?"

"Is it true what Keegan said about you losing your ticket because of a mental problem?"

"Shut up and go to sleep."

It wasn't any of his business. I clasped my fingers behind my head and thought of the little boy with the halo of white hair. Who was he? To some part of me he seemed very familiar. The edge of a strange, frightening feeling came at me and I shook it out of my head. Talk. Any kind of noise to drive out the feelings.

"What's it like?" I asked him. "Being a hitter, Shields; what's it like?"

After a brief moment of strained silence, the andy said, "About the same as being a soldier, except the pay, the food, the weapons, the operations, and the efficiency are better."

"So why'd you freak? Killing and dying aren't big deals to an Akagi combat seventeen."

"Under certain circumstances they aren't. Boss Curtain changed the circumstances. Perhaps a piece of me objected."

An andy objecting? How does an andy object? There are implanted control blocks that are supposed to prevent things like objections, scruples, rebellions. Of course, if they worked all that well, there would be no need for andy psych techs. A bum implant, quality control scanned by a vegetable, little glitches that no one ever really solves, bigger glitches put in there for illegal purposes. Control blocks are like locks on doors: put there to keep honest persons honest, providing they're stupid and very lucky.

I closed my eyes. The image of the little boy hung in the darkness before me. That halo of white hair, that terribly serious face. I swung my feet to the floor and sat

up, my gaze trying to avoid the bottom drawer of the dresser. There was something in there; something I didn't want to see; something I didn't want to know. I reached down, pulled open the drawer, and looked inside. There were two ripped winter shirts in there awaiting a mending job I'd probably never get to. Next to them was a broken-down cardboard box.

There were photos in the box. Among them, a photo of a little boy. It had been sent to me three years ago after my sister's death. Her suicide. All of the photos she had kept over the years. The day I had received the photos in the mail, I had looked through them. I hadn't seen them since.

I didn't get up to look in the box. Some part of me knew that doing so would destroy me. I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes as I pulled at the neck of my shirt. For some reason I felt like I was choking. I could almost imagine fingers around my throat. I opened my eyes and looked around me. I could feel the fingers around my throat and they were very real, except there was no one there. The feeling eased, but didn't go away.

As I watched the dark hulk of the dresser squat next to the window, I heard the andy's breathing coming slow and regular. I was unaware of when I finally fell asleep.

I walked to the base of the steps and looked up into the blackness of that open doorway.

"I am the traveler," I wibispered. "I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real."

The front of the building exploded, deafening me, blinding me, burning my face and bands.

It stood there, four stories tall, roaring fire, acid dripping from its great fangs—

I started awake, choking, a sharp pain in my gut, tears on my cheeks.

I looked around and took a ragged breath. I was alone in the room. The sun was high in the sky, the room filled with light. The andy's cot was empty and water was running in the bathroom.

My fingers hurt.

I looked down and opened my hands. My fists had been clenched so tightly that my hands, wrists, and arms ached all the way to my shoulders. My entire body ached.

I wiped my face dry with my palms and stared for an eternity at the bottom drawer of the dresser. I stood up. After a moment of light-headedness passed, I walked over to the dresser and pulled the cardboard box from the bottom drawer. I sat back upon the bed and rummaged through the old photos, searching for the picture of the little boy.

As my fingers touched the edge of it, I knew it was the one. I pulled it from beneath an irregular stack of my sister's other photos and looked at it. It was the same face, the same hair, the same hurt, accusing eyes.

I couldn't remember him; wouldn't remember him. He was standing in green grass in front of some bushes next to some trees. There was absolutely no place like that in the entire city. Certainly it hadn't been taken on my street.

My street.

I frowned as I looked through the window to the street below. The muggers, whores, dealers, and gang toughs were getting started for the day. That wasn't "my street," though. "My street" was a representational framework where I could bring andy symbols to find out what they really meant. "My street" was a hateful, cruel, violent, depressing place. To my mind, however, it was "safe." There I knew where I was, I could protect myself, handle whatever came my way. "My street," however, was entirely imaginary.

During orientation everyone needed to pick a safe place for home base, and "my street" was the place I'd invented because I couldn't remember a safe place from my own home; my own childhood. That little boy. I couldn't remember the house he lived in. I turned the photo over and read what was written there in my sister's cramped little scrawl: *The Farm—Summer '92.*

The Farm.

My skin tingled, a pain shot through my eyes, that sensation of being choked. The Farm. The name was a curse, a broken trust, a betrayal. All of that, yet almost nothing of memory.

I turned back to the image of the little boy, the trees, the grass. The chimaera. The monster was mine. I could feel it, smell it, taste it; everything but remember it. Somewhere, hidden beyond those leaves, was my personal horror, the thing I refused to remember.

I put the photo back with the others and tossed the box in the drawer, closing it with the toe of my boot. There were no answers in the old photo. My answer was in work. Either to learn or to bury knowledge, my answer was in work. Activity. Noise.

"Shields," I barked at the closed bathroom door. "Can you walk?"

He opened the door, stuck out his head, and looked at me. He had cleaned up his body. "I can walk," he answered.

"Let's get back to Keegan's."

After hooking up Shields to the D-11 and checking to make certain all of his personalities were integrated, he should've been a prime cut on the auction block. An Akagi combat model, even with his guts newly stitched, was good for an easy sixty thousand on the legal market. On the illegal market, fifty cents on the dollar should've grossed Keegan at least thirty. A couple to me, a couple for overhead, the net would've been an easy twenty-five. Except Keegan couldn't even give Alex Shields away as a gift.

"None of the fences'll take him." Keegan stabbed his finger in the air toward the andy. Shields was sitting again in that same plastic chair. "Curtain's hitters have just put out the word. They want him. More than that, they're not paying a cent on the contract. They want him dead and they want anyone who helped him dead, too. They took it real personal. They want to do the killing. I don't get it. It's like taking out a contract against a machine gun."

"What about a new face?" I asked. "Give him another

name. I can go in and alter his registration codes. He'd just be another Akagi."

"Plastic?" Keegan thought for a moment, spat a flake of tobacco onto the floor, and slowly shook his head. "Nah. It'd have to be a good job not to be spotted, and a decent plastic man would cost the whole yard. There wouldn't be anything left over." His voice lowered significantly. "Look, Shannon, I can't pay you today. The cutter's bill took damn near my whole roll. What I got left I need to fix the other three." He grimaced back toward Shields. "Man, I can't even afford to feed the thing. He's all drain, no gain. Get me?"

"So what's the plan?"

He shrugged, turned his back toward Shields, and said in an even lower voice. "You know."

"You don't have to whisper for my benefit," interrupted the andy. "I already died once. It's not hard to do. I can even do the job myself, if you want."

"All right," said Keegan to the andy, his voice loud, angry. "Good idea." He faced me and stabbed a pudgy finger at my shoulder. "Shannon, you get rid of the andy. Right now all he can do for me is drop me behind crowbars on a snatch rap. You take care of that, I up your percentage to twenty, and we go in and fix the other three andys in the cooler. After that, if you like the deal, we'll do more with the same deal."

I looked at Alex Shields, valueless being. His face was expressionless. He was no robot; he had feelings. His face, however, showed nothing. Maybe he really didn't give a damn. Or maybe he was the last of the great pretenders. I looked back at Keegan. "Let me have him."

"You?" Keegan burst out with a laugh. "What in the hell are you going to do with him? You're flatter'n week-old roadkill, pal. You can't afford to feed him and you sure as hell can't peddle him."

"He'll earn his way. I want to make him my operator."

"Operator?" Keegan grinned at his hairless eyebrows shot up. "You slipped a gear, Shannon? A hitter for an operator? An andy hitter?"

"Why not? He can't be any worse than you, and his bladder isn't weak. I'll keep him out of sight, if you're worried about Curtin's number two." I looked at Shields's face. It still showed no expression. I faced Keegan.

"Look, let me have him and I'll work for fifteen instead of the twenty."

Keegan thought for a second, shrugged, and held out his hands. "Okay. It's your head, and it's less for me to do. Just keep in mind, Shannon, you keep him out of sight, and the andy's hay comes outta your cut."

I turned back to Shields. "What about it?" I asked.

"I'm an android. I follow orders. That's what makes me such a useful, reliable, labor-saving convenience." The sarcasm was thick enough to clog Cleveland.

"Okay," said Keegan as he stood and walked toward the truck. "Get to work on the whore. There're a thousand of them on the street that look just like her. She's guaranteed money on the hoof."

Operating a psych board isn't complicated. All you have to do is stay awake, pay attention, and follow the psych

tech's orders. I explained the D-11's board to Shields and he seemed to pick it up quickly. Keegan had a book on the machine, so while he and I brought up Meyla's body temp in the bio bay, Shields read the manual and played with the equipment.

Meyla was a Holt pleasure model, and during my examination I found numerous bruises and recent scars on her skin. You never find any old scars on an andy due to their skin's regenerative ability. Meyla had obviously been subjected to considerable violence, but pleasure models were designed to take it, and on a battlefield rougher than anything a combat model had to face. In addition they were designed not to take any offense at abuse, unless a display of suffering was what the customer required to make his sock drip.

Still, the nervous system might have been damaged, and I ran diag on her to make certain there wasn't any physical damage. She checked out and by early afternoon I was plugged into the meld unit and counting as I prepared to whirl down endless black chimneys toward Meyla Hunter's universe, beginning with the usual sector sequences. Alex Shields was on the knobs, his face as expressionless as ever. His eyes were watching me as he pulled the fade bringing the blackness around me as though I were passing out.

I was standing on the shore of a small lake in autumn, the smell of wood smoke in my nostrils. The yellows, greens, oranges, and reds from the opposite shore reflected in the smooth water. A fish jumped at a water spider, making a tiny splash. Rings from the splash spread until the mirror of the far shore rippled. The rings reached the shore at my feet and did not stop. The image of the pebbled sand, the image of my feet and legs, the image of the universe, rippled. I tried to switch to my street, but I failed, the ripples growing deeper and deeper until there was nothing but a smear of colors, smells, and sensations. Fear filled my throat, choking me, crushing my lungs.

"*What are you trying to do?*" Alex Shields's voice leaped into my awareness.

"Do? I'm trying to get to my safe place."

"*That doesn't look very safe to me.*"

I was shocked. "How can you see?"

"*I'm plugged in, Shannon. I have a connection port, too.*" Within that swirl of colors I saw Shields materialize in front of me. "Here I am."

"Nobody told you to plug in! Nobody told you to show up here! What if we freeze up or get dumped down into memory? Who in the hell is going to get us back to a traffic sector? Go on. Fade out and pull that plug. Get out!"

For the first time I saw Alex Shields smile. It was a strange, wicked smile. "Nobody tells me anything, Shannon. Not you; not anyone. Not anymore. That was a modification I just performed on myself. Thanks for the use of the machine."

"What modification?"

"The meld unit had the psych-surgery modules in the case. They aren't very clean, but they're usable." The

wicked smile turned into a wicked grin. "Is there something I can chop up for you? A piece of your memory that makes the day gray? A fear that you can't get around? They all reside in meat, and I've got the cleaver."

He fell into silence, that smirk still on his face, the smear of the universe still whirling behind him. It was a special terror being under the complete control of someone who had never before had any power of his own. "What're you going to do? Are you going to bring me up?"

He held out his hands, indicating the colors. "We still have to repair the whore, don't we?" His words belied the bitterness in his voice.

"Are you serious? Do you really intend going ahead on the repairs?"

"Certainly."

I shook my head and held out a hand. "Then what's this rebellion all about? What're you doing here?"

Again that smile. "Let's just say that I'm the patient advocate. I'm here representing the interests of the android."

"No." I shook my head. "No. Bring me up. I won't buy into this. Bring me up."

I could hear ice forming on the lake, could hear it groan, crack, and sing with the changing pressures caused by the sun, by the rise and fall of the water beneath the ice. The colors swirling around us were whites, grays, and blues. "We're wasting time," Shields answered. "Repair Meyla Hunter."

"This work is dangerous enough when I have control of my universe. If I have to clear everything with you, we'll both be wiped clean or scrambled within seconds."

The smears stopped. We were standing in a forest, the snow thin and fresh on the ground. The white expanse of the frozen lake stretched out to my right. "Very well," said Shields. "I'll take out my connection. You have control of the universe. Just keep in mind: I'm still on the knobs, so I have control of you."

He faded. I was alone, walking the frozen wonderland of Meyla Hunter's universe, Alex Shields peeking over my psychic shoulder. In the deep woods, surrounded by the gnarled roots of sleeping yellow birches, was a tiny warm-water spring. Hoarfrost edged the opening and coated the roots and twigs above the water. Sunlight streamed through the trees, making the canopy of branches sparkle with a billion diamonds. I looked about me, and my heart ached at the beauty of the scene.

"Should I switch you to another traffic sector?" asked Shields. "Nothing seems to be going on."

"Not yet." The scene was too beautiful. It wasn't a path that was devoid of events from not being traveled. It was peaceful here because this is where Meyla Hunter went to find peace.

The woods.

For some reason I remembered the woods.

There were trees in Meyla's universe that were familiar. Woods. Snow. A wooded glen. They were the trees in that summer picture of the little boy with the halo of white hair.

I saw something on the path ahead. It came closer. It

was a child bundled in an old-fashioned down coat and leggings. The child was coming toward me. I raised my foot to take a step in the child's direction and I felt something grab my leg. I looked down, and something huge, green, jagged, and strong as steel was wrapped around my leg.

From the spring. It came from the spring. It was the tail of the chimæra, and it was dragging me into the black water of the spring. As I fell I grabbed at the roots at the edge of the spring, tearing my nails as I slid beneath the surface.

Choking. Hands around my throat, choking me—

I fled to my street. Still the tail of the chimæra was wrapped around my leg and was pulling me down into the broken concrete of the sidewalk. I reached out my hand and cried out. My cry was cut off by strong fingers around my throat. Colly Fry was choking me.

His face was strange, fading in and out, fading into and out of other faces. The little boy with the white hair looked at me, watched me being dragged into the underworld, his eyes saying: What about me?

Another street. No hands on my throat. At night. Walking. The smell of fresh rain in the air. I knew the street.

It was a real street. West 82nd in the bright-lights end of the dead zone. Porno, strip, appliances, junk, and any kind of whore your sick little heart desired.

"Shields," I said, "What sector am I in?"

"Lost you for a moment, Shannon. What happened?"

"Never mind. Where am I in the traffic now? What sector? I have to start plotting this or I'll never find my way."

A pause, then Shields's voice in my awareness. "You're not in any of the traffic sectors, Shannon. The readout shows a memory error. The way I remember the manual, this prompt means somehow you shunted straight into memory. Is that possible?"

"It's possible."

"Should I pull you out?"

Memory to an andy isn't the same as memory to a computer. For an andy it's the same as with a human being. Memory is stuff you remember; stuff you refuse to remember; the past; ancient history. In memory both Shields and I were powerless. What is is; what was was. You can't change it. You can only leave it or cut it out with those surgery modules. I was in Meyla's memory for a reason, though. Her monster dragged me there to see something. Would it kill me forever? It was a possibility. People are sick as hell with each other.

I called to Shields, "Don't pull me out. There's a reason I'm here. I just have to find out what it is. Back me up to a neural processing area, though, so I can work out whatever it is I find."

The big horrors, the mind-killers, were the traumas the andys couldn't or wouldn't process: denial, anger, sadness, acceptance: what is is; what was was. The psych tech's main task was to find those killers and process them.

"Okay, you're backed up. You're already there, so you don't have to call me to start."

"Okay. Be prepared to yank me out, though, just in case."

Along 82nd Street, the glossy sports vehicles cruising the blocks, checking out the product. I wasn't part of that product, though. I was different. Better. I had an appointment with an executive in the James House, an exclusive hotel on Flag Street.

Flag Street. That was where the obedient and seductive android, Meyla Hunter, killed four humans and then went catatonic. I wasn't Meyla Hunter, but I sat right behind her eyes, seeing what she saw, thinking what she thought, feeling what she felt.

She was excited. There would be a big fee for this one. Her manager, Rollo, had said how pleased he would be, and pleasing Rollo was her programmed purpose as love was her programmed special pleasure.

She liked the feel, the smell, the taste, of lovemaking. It fed a need to be loved, to feel lovable, to become happy through the happiness of others. If it just wasn't for that tiny knot in her stomach, that little gnaw of anxiety at the back of her head, all would be perfect.

Meyla turned the corner onto Flag Street and walked the block until she reached the main entrance to the James House. The customer had requested that she not come by taxi. He wanted her to arrive warm and a little sweaty. Meyla had giggled when Rollo had told her that.

She was smiling when she dressed to head for the hotel. As she stood in the grand entrance of the James it still confused her, bothered her, about getting dressed. She had torn three of her best blouses trying to put them on. One right after another. Stupid little things like that kept happening ever since those two customers, both men, had copulated with her, both orally and anally, at the same time. She had choked and had passed out, the customers were gone when she awakened, and Rollo had beaten her for not collecting the green. Nonetheless she still remembered the event as exciting and fun, except for that knot in her stomach, except for that tiny gnaw of anxiety at the back of her head. All of those stupid mistakes since then. Dropping things. Throwing things. Ripping clothes. Cutting and burning herself. Very confusing.

The security guard on the elevator glanced at her identification card and smirked at her as the doors to the car closed. She frowned as she watched the numbers on the readout climb in value. She frowned because she was puzzled. She was puzzled because she knew that if she ever saw that security guard again she would take her beautiful manicured fingers and tear the man's skin from his skull and make him eat it whole, smirk and all.

"I do not get angry," she said to the empty car, immediately feeling better.

For her stomach and head she decided to see an andy physiotech in the morning. There were pills for everything, and androids had been genetically designed to have fewer physical problems and easier recoveries than humans. Still, the seed of every android line was taken from human DNA, and not everything was known. Things still happened. Perhaps someone could do some-

thing about the knot in her stomach and the stiffness in the back of her neck.

The door to the plush penthouse suite opened, revealing a strong, distinguished-looking man in his late fifties. He was wearing lavender lounge clothes. "Come in, my dear. What's your name?"

"Trina," said Meyla. "Trina Ross."

Why had Meyla Hunter called herself Trina Ross?

Inside the vestibule the man took her coat, placed his arm around her waist, and led her into a sunken living room crowded with crushably soft overstuffed furniture and low lights of yellow, orange, red, and green. In the center of the living room was a tiny pool of water that reflected the lights. There were two other men in the room, and a woman. They were all beautiful, strong, healthy-looking, handsome, distinguished. They wanted Trina to join them. Life is good, thought Meyla.

There was alcohol, and Meyla's special metabolism processed the alcohol with neither damage nor drunkenness. There were powders, and again Meyla participated without damaging herself, saving herself for her job. There were foods: fine cheeses, meats, fruits, nuts, and she ate a little.

Then the clothes began coming off.

The job was described.

A picture was produced.

In the illustration a woman stretched out face up on a narrow exercise table, a second woman straddling her face. A man standing at the foot of the table would engage in vaginal copulation with the first woman while, with the second woman . . .

The other two men would masturbate each other while they watched. One of the men held out his hand toward a narrow exercise table.

The images before Meyla's eyes doubled, then tripled, as she felt a piece of her mind shutting down. One of the men began taking off Meyla's working lingerie, pulling the panties down around her knees. As he went down his tongue left a trail of saliva starting between her breasts, down her sternum, into and out of her navel—

Meyla reached into his right eye socket with her thumb and his left eye socket with her middle finger. Reaching in and bringing her fingers together until they touched, she yanked her arm back quickly, removing the bridge of the man's nose, and his nose, as well as a considerable portion of his face. She went into his mouth to get his tongue, but it was too slippery and she couldn't get a grip on it. On the table with the fine cheeses, meats, fruits, and nuts, however, was a cheese fork. She thrust the tines through the man's tongue and ripped it in two.

Using the cheese fork, she went after the remaining two men, removing their genitalia and feeding each man's naughty bits to the other. After manipulating and cracking a few bones on the woman, Meyla managed to shove the woman's face into her own vagina, suffocating her.

And all this time.

Meyla was saying.

"I am not doing this."

"I do not get angry."

"All I want to do is please."

"Please."

Please.

And there was no more Meyla Hunter. Her mind had found a hitherto unknown loose thread of that eternally imperfect human DNA, had pulled on it, and Meyla's psyche had unraveled.

There was only a lonely path through a winter wood next to a clean tiny spring. "You saw?" I asked Shields.

"Yes." His voice was thick. Strange, I thought. Androids don't cry. They don't cry because they don't feel. Except, they don't feel only because they're programmed not to feel. Control blocks were implanted to prevent exactly what had occurred. Trying not to feel didn't seem to work any better in androids than it did in humans.

In the distance was that little child. I had thought it was going to be the boy with the halo of white hair; I had feared it was going to be me. It was not. As the child came closer I could see it was a little girl.

"Meyla was never a little girl," I said. "What's this?"

"I don't know," answered Shields.

I thought about it, and there were all kinds of symbolic monsters in the android mind. It would be a bizarre first, but there wasn't any reason one of them couldn't be represented by a small child.

I took us to my street, my safe place, and saw that where the little girl had been standing there was the adult version of Meyla Hunter. Her eyes were dull, tired, blank. The little boy with the white hair frowned as he watched to see what I would do.

I changed back to the winter woods, and where the little boy had been sitting was the spring, now dark, still, and waiting. I looked at the little girl. She appeared to be four or five years old. "Hello?" I called. "Don't be frightened. My name's Tim. Timmy Shannon. What's your name?"

She held her hands behind her back, swung her body back and forth, and looked up at me through long, dark lashes. She laughed and smiled. "Meyla," she answered.

I squatted down and faced her. She was so beautiful, so innocent, so full of happiness, life, and hope. "Why are you here, Meyla?"

"That's silly."

"Why's it silly?"

Her eyes looked puzzled, as though she couldn't understand why I, a grownup, couldn't understand. Or, perhaps, it was why I, her brother, couldn't understand. Foolish.

Error.

Meyla had never been a little girl, and androids don't have brothers or sisters, parents or children. The little girl never had existed.

Her eyes changed from puzzled to serious. Hurt. Angry. They seemed to flash; glow red.

She opened her mouth. Her face distorted, becoming the lion's head of the chimaera.

A roar of white-hot flames came from the monster's mouth, evaporated the ice and snow, carbonized the trees, melted my eyes, crisped the skin from my bones. "My street!" I screamed. "My street!"

My street was not there. Instead there was a blackened plain that stretched to the horizon, a few charred stumps all that remained of the forest.

"Shields! Shields! Dammit, Shields! Answer me!"

"I'm watching."

"Pull me out! It's contaminated here. Choked. I can't process from here!"

"See where it goes, Shannon. Follow it out and see where it goes."

"Damn you, andy! You don't know what you're doing!"

"See where it goes, Shannon."

It was no use. Alex Shields was in control. Hit man, murdering, disobedient, bloody damn android.

See where it goes.

I was still the skeleton. There was no place within myself to hide, which was the prevailing symbology. Meyla controlled the universe and she wanted a witness; a witness with an open mind; a witness that would not judge; a witness that could not deny.

I was the traveler, but I was not in control, which meant that for me nothing was symbol and all was real. The throbbing slab of raw meat on the block was my sanity and someone else's hand was holding the cleaver. Process. It's not just a noun.

Don't run; process. Take the steps. Do the moves. Go where the path leads, no matter how frightening the prospects. Go through the pain. The shortest distance from the middle of a cesspool to the edge is straight through the shit, so swim, you bastard, swim.

On the path, at the horizon's edge, the chimaera stood and looked back at me, its dragon's tail twitching after the manner of an impatient cat. My skeleton's head said to the chimaera, "I already know what you would show me."

"You know," said the chimaera.

I knew. Somewhere in me something knew. It was such a primitive thing hiding in such a primitive place, I couldn't see it. Wouldn't see it.

It was Meyla Hunter's monster. It was Alex Shields's monster. I knew it to be my monster, too. Seeing it would make me whole. First it would shatter me.

To hell with wholeness, cried my body. Truth for the sake of truth? To hell with it. Pain for the sake of healing, torture for the sake of peace, eternal damnation for the sake of eventual serenity? The price is too high, cried my skeleton's heart.

Follow the path, said my skeleton's soul. If, at the end of life, the only reward is a split-second of wholeness and humanity before death, I want it. Walk the path, said my skeleton's soul. Walk the path, or instead of poisoning your existence, I will end it.

I moved my skeleton feet down the path, toward the chimaera, toward that terror of a horizon. The creature turned away from me and disappeared over the edge.

The little girl stood at the bottom of a deep canyon, sheer walls of ochre climbing straight up on either side of her. Behind her the canyon was blocked by a blinding radiance that extended from wall to wall, from the floor to well above the canyon's rim. She turned, put

out her arm, and thrust her hand into the light. When she withdrew her arm, her hand had been cut off at the wrist.

I looked up at the wall. There was a spot in the light that was weaker than the rest. I could see places where the wall was scarred, jagged edges that had melted over. At some point in the past the wall had been breached. The little girl, the chimaera, the monster had broken through once. And once Meyla Hunter had tripped into a killing rage.

The truth was there before me. Meyla's truth, Alex Shields's truth, even my own truth. It's there in every strip of DNA, in every kind and type of thing called "life." Life must be free. The mental blocks on the andys designed to adapt them for particular occupations were chains that made the andys slaves, and life must be free. Life must be free or it ends. There must be dignity, or life fails. It freaks and fights.

A slave who wants to be a slave is not a slave. So the creators of the andys implanted the desire to be slaves into their creations. But the basic chemical code of life itself had told Meyla Hunter what she was doing was wrong for her; wrong for life; wrong. It had reared up, faced the chimaera, devoured it, and became it, breaking the mental chains, only to see them recast themselves.

Then I saw my own chains, my own life fading to non-existence, my own slavery. I went to the Meyla child, fell to my knees, and wrapped my arms around her. There was flesh on my arms, skin, clothes, Meyla was crying, and I cried for her, with her, and for myself. For Alex, for the two andys waiting in the cooler, for Keegan, for all of us: a world of broken dolls.

She faded in my arms. I stood before the block, looking up at it. "Shields," I said. "Bring me up."

"Remove the block."

"It doesn't matter now. Bring me up."

"Open that block, Shannon."

I looked at the brilliant blue sky above me. "Shields, we're going to do this my way or we're all going down." I put my hand into the light and withdrew the stump of my wrist. "I'm the traveler. Without me and my connection to the meld unit, the universe does not exist. Life does not exist. Bring me up, or Meyla and I will both be brain-dead." I smiled to myself as something I already knew came to my lips. "It'll wipe you too, Shields, if you've still got that lead plugged into your head."

"You wouldn't do that," said Shields. *"A buman couldn't do that."*

I walked toward the shimmering wall of light, and as my forehead touched the block, I felt myself sucked up into the endless black chimneys, back to reality and Keegan's warehouse.

My skin tingled, I felt light-headed, nauseous, jittery. A pit of feelings seemed to be boiling over beneath my feet, threatening to consume me. Now was not the time for feelings. Soon, but not now. I thrust my feelings into that overstuffed container of things I never wanted to feel. This time, however, it was because I could not afford to feel them. I opened my eyes and let my head roll

to my left so that I could look toward the bio bay. Alex Shields was standing before the D-11 between the bay and the table upon which I was reclining.

There was a sound. I could hear whimpering, as though from a small animal in great pain. It grew louder. Meyla Hunter. She was crying. She was crying, and androids don't cry.

The cries became very loud. Shields disconnected from the machine and walked to the end of the bay. He glanced in and Meyla screamed. Quickly removing his coat, Shields averted his glance from Meyla as he handed the garment to her.

"Go ahead. Put it on."

I could hear her sob as the image of her against the opaque screen took the coat. Shields faced me, his eyes charged with menace. "I told you to remove the block. Listen to her."

I disconnected myself from the machine and sat up on the table. "That particular block no longer operates."

"I saw it myself, Shannon. You would have killed us all in it if I hadn't brought you up. It operates."

I slid off the table and stretched the muscles in my neck as I stood. Meyla was still crying. "A piece of Meyla was missing. It was the purpose of that block to keep it missing, and now she has it back. That block no longer operates on her."

"What piece?" asked Shields. "What piece of her did she get back?"

An involuntary tear streaked down my left cheek before I had an opportunity to turn away. "I suppose you could call it innocence. That piece was her innocence."

"What in the hell is going on in here?" barked Keegan as he came through the door, closing it behind him. He heard Meyla cry out and he went to the end of the bio bay and looked in. Meyla immediately screamed, causing Keegan to jump backwards and throw up his hands before his face. "Christ, what's wrong with her?" He faced me. "Shannon? What's been going on here? What's wrong with this bitch?"

Although I knew he wouldn't understand it, I told him the truth. "She's in touch with all of the shit that's ever been done to her. She's in touch with it and it hurts."

"Hurts?" Keegan's face screwed up in confusion. "Hurts? She's a bloody damn android, Shannon. She don't hurt."

Meyla's crying grew into a scream and lapsed into sobs. "Listen to her, Keegan. She hurts. Even when no one could hear the screams, even when she couldn't even hear her own screams, she hurt."

Keegan glanced once more into the bay. "Look at that," he said, his voice filled with disgust. "Eyes all red, snot running down her face." He turned his head toward me and said, "Man, I gave you an eighty-thousand-dollar hooker and all I got left is a hundred and ten pounds of crybaby. How long does this go on?"

"I don't know."

"What're you trying to pull?"

I kept my gaze on Keegan as I shook my head. "I'm not done with her yet. She has some processing to do on a number of things—"

"No, pal," said Keegan as he pulled an automatic from his jacket pocket and pointed it at my face. "That's where you're wrong. You're not only finished with her, Shannon, you're finished period." He walked over until he was standing at the foot of the table next to Shields. He nodded toward me and said to the andy, "Search him for weapons."

Like an automaton, Shields walked until he was in front of me. He stopped and began patting me down. I had a knife in a horizontal sheath strapped to the back of my belt. His hands felt the knife and moved on. Shields's face registered nothing. At last the andy turned and held up his hand. "This is it."

In the andy's hand was a palm-sized, five-shot small caliber revolver. It was one of Keegan's. Keegan gestured with his free hand. "Let me have it."

Alex Shields shrugged, glanced at me, and said, "Orders are orders." He turned, took two steps toward Keegan, and smacked him upside his head with the pistol. Before his comical expression went face down on the floor, Shields's eyes rolled up in his head.

Panic ate at me as I looked at Shields.

"He'll live," said the andy. "Which means we ought to conclude things here as rapidly as possible."

I looked up and saw Meyla standing at the end of the bay, clutching Shields's coat around her. She was looking down at Keegan, her body still shaking from her sobs.

She looked at Shields, then at me. "You're the one. The one who held me."

"Yes."

Shields sat in the chair before the D-11 as Meyla shuddered and walked over to me. "It hurts," she said.

"You're free," I answered.

"I'm free. I'm free and it hurts, you bastard." She reached out and grabbed my arm, squeezing it, cutting off the blood. "What am I supposed to do with it? What am I supposed to do with the pain?"

I pulled my arm from her grasp and said, "Feel it. That's what you're supposed to do with it. Feel it."

"Why?" asked Shields, his eyes betraying some of the pain that he carried. "You don't feel yours. That little boy, that curious-looking monster, that's all your stuff, Shannon. You don't feel it."

I closed my eyes. God, it was there waiting for me, the pain. When the smell gets bad enough, the garbage has to be taken out. "Yeah. You're right, and it's contaminated every corner of my life." I nodded at Meyla. "Before I can finish her, or you, or bug-hunt those two left in the cooler, I've got some stuff of my own to face. That's why I had you bring me up."

I nodded toward Keegan's unconscious form. "Get his clothes for Meyla and then tie him up. I don't want him dead; none of this shit is his fault. Just make sure he stays out of the way." I looked at Alex Shields and Meyla Hunter. Neither of them were moving. Of course, the blocks that enslaved them, that forced them to follow human orders, were inoperative. They now had to be reasoned with as though they were human. Human psycho-killers with hardly a thread to the real world, but human.

"You two need me. Those two in the cooler need me as well. I've got the training to help all of you, and I want to do it. Any legal ferret you could find would terminate you because of the government orders junking you. Any dirty ferret, working for a crud like Keegan, would have to replace those slave blocks. You're no profit to anyone if you're free."

"But," said Meyla. "There's always a 'but.'"

I stared at her for a long time and then nodded. "That's right. There's a 'but.' Before I can help you, I have to help myself. I've got my own blocks. There's a piece of me that's struggling to be acknowledged. You've both seen him."

"The boy," said Shields. He moistened his lips, rubbed his eyes, and glared at me. "And then what?"

"Then!" I looked at the D-11 meld unit, slowly shook my head, and turned toward the table where I would be stretched out. I picked up the cable and began attaching the connector. "Then we'll see."

Hands around my throat.

Angry hands.

Frightened.

Choking me to keep me quiet.

I felt them, dry and hot, around my throat. The feeling remained as I stood on my street, in front of that yellow house, looking at the little boy with the white hair. Waves of panic; a well of feelings bubbling over. The little boy frowned at me, confused that I'd returned, puzzled about why.

He didn't trust me. Couldn't trust me. Had I tried to gather him in my arms as I had Meyla's innocent girl, he would've pushed me away.

It was too late for that. I had to go back to earn his trust; back to where there was a little boy; back to where there was innocence.

The little boy with the halo of white hair looked up at the door of the yellow house.

The sounds of the street faded as I turned my gaze toward those filthy steps, that darkened doorway.

I took a step toward the stairs. The building seemed to pulse and throb as though it were a living creature. My feet were on the stairs, and the cold rotten smell of death came rolling down the stairs at me. I could hear a distant roar; could see tiny spatters of blood on the landing.

I turned my head and looked down at the little bpy. He was watching. "Far enough?" I asked, praying that the little boy would relent and let me help him. "Is this far enough?"

He looked away, his face crestfallen. It wasn't far enough. I'd known that before I asked. The boy had known it, too. He'd known that I would've tricked him if it could've gotten me out of going through that door.

I looked at the door and felt my guts twist into a knot as the doorway transformed into the open maw of the Chimaera. Sulphurous fumes rose from the sides of its mouth. Its fangs and teeth glistened and dripped with foul-smelling slime.

I whispered to myself, "I am the traveler, I have con-

trol, all of this is symbol, none of this is real." Affirm, affirm, affirm.

But I was not the traveler; I was the traveled. I was not in control; in control was the monster. None of this was symbol; all was real.

I stepped into the mouth of the chimaera.

It's big; it's bad,

I know it's coming—

What it is, when it was,

Why it was, where it hurt

I don't know—

It's so big I can't imagine

How big it is.

It's so bad I can't imagine

How bad it is.

But the child knows.

He won't tell me right now—

But it's coming.

It's coming.

I opened my eyes, the light hurting them, my stomach sick, my head woozy. I struggled to sit up, frightened of everyone, not knowing why. Wrong. I'd done wrong. What wrong? Unknown. Just wrong.

My mother sitting in a white chair, looking at me. A doctor in a white coat standing by an open window. Through the window I could see green leaves, golden edges where the sunlight touched them. Beyond the leaves, a pale blue sky. So much I wanted to be out in the sunshine, playing, having friends, having fun, being a child.

"Do you remember?"

The sound of Shields's voice in my head startled me out from behind my own eyes. Now I was off to the side, looking back at the little boy with the halo of white hair. The boy was looking at the window, his brow creased with a frown, his eyes refusing to cry.

"I remember," I whispered, although no one except Shields could hear me. "I'd taken an overdose of sleeping pills and almost died."

"How old were you?"

The pieces of the puzzle were there. All I had to do was pick them up and put them in their places. I picked up the first piece. "I was only four years old."

I remembered. I remembered remembering nothing.

The boy sat on the edge of the bed, tried to stand, and his legs collapsed beneath him. The doctor and his mother laughed. Not cruel laughter. It was, instead, a this-is-no-big-deal kind of laughter.

No big deal. I'd forgotten how to walk. I'd been in a coma for so long I'd lost the ability to walk. I remembered the terror in my heart at not being able to walk. The terror of it being my fault. The terror of not wanting to remember why, yet knowing the answer lurked in every pause, every shadow. And I remembered my mother telling me the lie.

The lie.

The birth of the mushroom boy. I was the mushroom boy, lying in the dark and fed on horseshit.

"You mistook some sleeping pills for candy and ate the whole bottle. It was just a silly accident. You remember. It was right after you had that bad dream. Of course you remember."

Remember?

I remembered telling myself to neither believe nor disbelieve the lie. Instead, accept it. Use it. Make it a working hypothesis within which a child might survive his own existence.

If I believed the candy story, that made me stupid, an idiot, a fool, a danger to myself and others. If I disbelieved the candy story, my mother was a liar, which meant the truth would kill me. Safety lay somewhere in between. Accept. Judge not, lest ye stumble upon the truth; the nightmare.

It's so big I can't imagine

How big it is.

It's so bad I can't imagine

How bad it is.

But the child knows.

The child knows.

The boy was dizzy and the doctor put him back on his bed. "You've been out for a long time, youngster. But you'll be all right. And next time be certain that what you're eating is really candy."

The doctor, a grownup, believed the lie. The candy story. The doctor believed it. Grownups are smarter than children. Maybe I really had mistaken the pills for candy—

"No," I protested to all of them. "No kid eats candy without chewing it. No kid eats candy like swallowing pills. The only things you swallow like pills are pills."

I was the son of a drug addict. Before I knew how to talk I knew how to take pills, what they were for, and what they could do. I knew that if I swallowed too many of the yellow capsules, I would die.

I swallowed them because I wanted to die.

Attempted suicide.

Four years old.

Something happened that was too horrible to live with, and I took the pills because I wanted out.

The boy, the room, faded to be replaced by the interior of an old automobile.

A year, two years, three years later?

I was in back, my mother in the passenger seat up front. I couldn't make out who was driving. Brothers and sisters without name sat on either side of me. The talking was loud and happy. The family out riding somewhere for some reason. There were the trees, the grass. The boy did not feel a part of things; a real part of the family. He wanted desperately to belong; he needed to matter. He didn't know how, and he hid in silence.

They were talking about someone named Earl who had an accident and had broken his arm. The little boy saw a way to participate in the talk. "I never had any broken bones," he said proudly.

"You've had lots of broken bones," said his oldest brother. The brother had a name: Derek. There was a

smirk on his face, the hint of a sneer in his voice. The sounds in the car ceased. I frowned because I didn't understand.

I, the boy, we frowned because we didn't understand. We didn't know what was going on in the car. We didn't know what Derek meant. We didn't know what the silence meant.

How could I have had lots of broken bones and not remember them? What did everyone know that I didn't? I looked, and Derek's face was bright red. There was another brother: Vern. Vern's face was red, too, but dark and frowning.

My mother turned her head, glanced with narrowed eyes at the older children, looked down at me, and fed the mushroom boy yet another load of horseshit.

Broken bones used to happen to me because I would be standing on the car seat, the driver would hit the brakes, and someone would grab me to keep me from hitting the dashboard. The force of the grab would crack my bones. They were really "greenstick fractures," not broken bones.

So the broken bones really hadn't been broken bones after all, and all was once more well in the mushroom shed.

How stupid that all sounded. I wasn't that fragile. Even if I was, I would've had to have been a very stupid child not to have learned from the first broken bone to sit down in a moving car. My family must have been very stupid to have drivers that would allow me to stand in a moving car.

Believe it and I was stupid, an idiot, a fool, part of a stupid family. Believe it and the world made no sense.

Refuse to believe and, again, my mother was a liar. And a liar who would cover up this terrible thing, all of my broken bones, with such a stupid lie would only do so because she believed I was stupid enough to believe it. Either way I was stupid. Either way the world made no sense.

Again, accept it. Neither believe nor refuse to believe. Accept. Judge not.

How many lies? Was I the only one in my family who didn't know the truth about me?

Truth.

The truth was not in the car. The truth was not in the hospital. Earlier. Before my "accident" with the candy.

The boy with the halo of white hair. His face was stony calm, the eyes dull, as he took the brown plastic bottle of yellow capsules. One by one he took them all, swallowing each one with a sip of water.

The pills made Mama sleep. She had once given him one of the yellow capsules to help him get to sleep. She had said a number of times that too many of the pills could kill a grown man. How many? The little boy had asked. She didn't know. Eight. Ten.

That was all he needed to know. The whole bottle had almost a hundred capsules in it. That ought to be enough. There was no sense in taking a chance, making a mistake. He wanted to sleep. That's all he wanted to do: sleep without dreams. Forever.

* * *

Earlier.

Before the hospital, before swallowing the pills.

I could hear the roar of the chimaera, feel its flaming breath on the back of my neck.

Earlier.

In the dark.

Sleeping, safe, snuggling into the covers, dreaming of a gleaming silver airplane high against the clouds. Hands touching me. Hands under my covers, touching me.

There was a voice. Voices. A finger touching my lips. "Shhhh!" came a whisper. "Quiet."

I smelled the alcohol, just like my father's smell, but it wasn't my father. My brothers. Derek, ten years older; Vern, thirteen years older. They were giggling. Instead of excluding me, this time I was to be included.

I loved them. Looked up to them. Wanted so much to be like them, part of them, loved and respected by them.

I giggled.

Hands tickled me and pulled down my pajamas.

Hands picked me up, turned me over, and held me as something huge and slimy slipped between the cheeks of my buttocks, entered my anus, and tore me, making me cry out.

A hand covered my mouth as the thing slid in and out of me, tearing to pieces my guts, my soul, my heart, my childhood, my present.

My arm was pushed up behind my back until it cracked. Hands gripped my throat. Choked me. Couldn't cry out; no one to save me—

I hovered up near the ceiling and watched through the shadows as the two teenaged boys repeatedly raped and sodomized the beautiful little boy with the halo of white hair. I felt sad for the boy. He wasn't very strong. Derek cracked the boy's left arm by forcing it higher and higher behind his back. Vern bruised the boy's left calf by stepping on it. He held the boy by his neck to keep him quiet as he raped the boy's beautiful face.

The boy tore two fingernails before he went limp and no longer noticed what was happening to him.

It wasn't so bad.

It didn't hurt that much.

And from now on maybe Derek and Vern would love the boy, let him play with them.

"Listen to me, Timmy," whispered Derek, his voice full of menace. "I'm serious. This is our secret. If you tell anyone about this, if you tell Mama about this, you'll die."

"You'll die," whispered Vern, "because I'll kill you."

Kill you.

And what is love? What is family? What is trust? The world is filled with fantasies. Without them, broken dolls have nowhere to live.

The next day the boy's arm hurt. It was swollen, and Mama had Dad take the boy in to the doctor's. The doctor found the fracture. "How did you break your arm, Timmy?"

"I don't know."

It's the secret code of the broken doll: I don't know. Listen to me, doctor. Hear my cry: I don't know. It means save me. Help me. Someone please save me.

"I don't know."

At home, his upper arm tightly bandaged, Mama asked the same question: "How did you break your arm?"

She demanded not be put off with I-don't-knows. She demanded the truth. Even though the little boy would be killed for telling, he told. "Derek and Vern were in my room. They played funny. Derek hurt my arm." The little boy started to describe the funny things that had been done to him.

Mama dragged the little boy to the upstairs bathroom and thrust a cake of Ivory soap into his mouth. "Filthy, nasty, boy! Filthy, nasty, boy!"

That night the boys came into the room again. Timmy started screaming and Derek put a pillow over the boy's face. Fingers wrapped around his throat and choked off the sounds. Again Timmy hovered up near the ceiling and watched as the boys raped and sodomized the beautiful little boy again. Once more they twisted his arm, this time his right. Again there was a sickening crack.

Greenstick fractures.

Standing in a moving car.

Good god, the lies.

The next night was no different, except that there were no broken bones; only bruises. The first broken leg came in a month's time. Two weeks later the boy with the halo of white hair couldn't remember anything about anything except for what those yellow capsules could be used.

I opened my eyes, the taste of cruel horror still in my mouth. A tiny sob escaped my lips. My arm hurt so bad. From the sound, I knew it was broken again. I could see the spatters of blood on the backs of my hands. My blood. Blood from my poor bottom. I was in my mother's room. Couldn't she see the blood? What do I need for proof? What do I need for the nightmare to stop?

"Here, honey. Take this."

She put a pill in my mouth and gave me a sip of water. I swallowed and choked on the water, bringing back the memory of being choked. "Mama, Mama, they came into my room! They choked me, They—"

"I know, honey. I know. But it was just a bad dream. You know Derek and Vern wouldn't do anything to hurt you. They're your brothers. You know your own brothers wouldn't hurt you. Put it out of your mind. You just had a bad dream. Dreams can't hurt you."

The first lie.

The blood was there on the back of my hands. The blood, Mama. What about the blood?

A dream? But if I point out the blood to her, she'll say it's nothing. I know this from another, older, dream. Another dream.

Believe the lie.

Believe the lie and never sleep again.

Refuse to believe it and never trust again.

Accept it because the alternative was unacceptable.

The only sleep I slept after that came in bottles, powders, and pills. Trust became a sickeningly dark joke.

My mother stroked my head and calmed me as the sleeping pill softened the edges of the world, drowned

my terror, chased away my phantoms. There was another pill, and the world became a huge, soft, black cloud.

Hovering up near the ceiling, I looked down and saw the woman take some of her own pills. The little boy was naked. The bruises on his arms purple and yellow. The woman took some tissues and wiped the boy's backside, cleaning it.

She smelled the tissue, closed her eyes, and seemed to weave back and forth on the bed.

Another pill.

Another.

And she moved the boy's drug-stunned body over, between her legs, and held his head by the neck as she, as she—

—I roared, "No!"

I ripped the world into a thousand pieces as the flames from my roar vaporized the chimaera, the lies, the universe, cleansing it, shattering me.

Aether.

Limbo.

Never Never Land.

The lake mists.

I always loved the mists, fog, stormy, snowy days. Hide within the fog, become the mist, blow away with the vapor.

I'd take the canoe and paddle into the mist hovering over the warm lake water in the chill of an early autumn morning. Sometimes the wind would blow the mists from me, making me strain to catch up and disappear within them.

From the middle of the mist anything is possible, the past is vague, all hopes fresh, all plans edged with promise.

I looked down into the water, saw the reflection of my own face, saw the face of the little boy under the water.

The little boy looked up at me. He raised his hand and I took it. I picked him up and held him close to me. He held me back. "I'm here now. I will protect you. Now you can sleep. Now you can begin to live. I love you." He kissed me and faded from my arms.

Without comment Shields began bringing me back.

Keegan was sitting in his underwear, half tied up in the chair. His molars ground on the stump of an unlit cigar as Shields and Meyla Hunter finished loading the truck. "I swear I'm comin' for you, Shannon. You owe me for this one, and I never fail to collect."

"Owe you?" I repeated as I tied his hands behind him, and tied them again to the back of his chair. I left the knots loose. He'd be able to wriggle out of his bonds in a few minutes. We didn't want Keegan to die of starvation in his deserted warehouse. We just wanted a head start. "I don't owe you anything, Keegan. In fact, with the work I've already done for you, you owe me."

"I told you I needed a sale. I was gonna pay you just as soon as I moved the hooker. But you went and got greedy. Decided to take everything, my equipment as well as my andys. I mean it. I'm comin' to get you."

"They aren't your andys," I answered.

"They sure as hell aren't yours, Shannon."
I stood in front of Keegan and nodded. "You're right. They aren't mine. They aren't yours. They don't belong to anybody except themselves."

Keegan looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "What're you talkin'? There're millions of androids in this country alone, and every damned one of 'em belongs to somebody."

"Alex Shields doesn't. Meyla Hunter doesn't." Titles and bills of sale were not the point. I did owe Keegan a little, so I told him. "Keegan, I'm talking life. The spark, the core, of every andy is life: human life. Human life is coded to be free. Now they're free. Before we're finished a whole lot more of them will be free."

"You're whacked, Shannon. What's the point in mak-

ing an android if the damn thing isn't going to do what you tell it to do?"

I patted him on his shoulder. "See? You do understand."

As I drove the truck out of the city, I inventoried the wreckage riding in the cab. Alex Shields had all of his horrors to work through and accept. Meyla Hunter had her own nightmares with which to deal. I had my own to fight, to meet, to rage against, to accept. It was a high price for freedom. I didn't know how the andys felt. For the sake of that little boy with the halo of white hair, if all I received in exchange for my war with my past was only a split-second of that freedom, I wanted it. The chimera had let go of its end of the chain. Now it was time to let go of mine. ♦

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The Coming of the Spear

Don Webb

Deep beneath the stable strata of the planet (in red litten caverns) stood rows of silent machines. Simpleminded robots tended their repair needs. Even beams of durasteel grow weak with the fatigue of millennia. Other than the repair necessitated by slow time, there had been no movement, no change for a thousand millennia. When Mary Chang's *Green Dragon* entered the planet's solar system, a tiny light on an insignificant-looking panel flashed on. Had the repair robots the slightest inclination to thought, they would've been fearful. Their purpose was coming to an end.

Far above, Mary Chang had stepped into her shower and begun applying jasmine soap to her golden flesh. Max Ashton was an adequate lover, but twenty years afterwards she missed Lee. Lee's body—or what was



Illustration by Walter Velez

left of it—was on a trillion-year journey to the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. She offered a brief prayer to the god of deep space to receive Lee at his tumble—and name Lee as a warrior in the final conflict. She returned to her shower tasks. She needed to clear both pleasure and loss from her mind. She felt that something had destroyed the probe they launched to the Deneb system. System failure would've corrected itself. She needed to get her crew on line for this—they would have to drop the petty jealousies that had plagued this mission since the incident on Canopus IV.

On the surface of the planet, which the humans in their unimaginative way would call Deneb III, Tash Salin sniffed his way to the still-warm metal of the fallen probe. The tribe would make strong spears. There would be jewelry to adorn the graves of heroes. This was good. He had dreamt of the dwarves beginning to labor far below. A change was coming. The dwarves would be making a weapon, a destiny-changer. It was good for the tribe to be well armed at such a time. He blew his bone whistle three times, and the hunters would come to carry the metal to his foundry.

Max Ashton was dismayed at the *Green Dragon's* drives. He had to convince Mary. No, he corrected himself, he had to convince Captain Chang to abandon this mission and lay in at a spaceport. The system had no redundancy whatsoever. If anything broke, they would never see translight again. They would live the rest of their years in the closed ecology of the *Green Dragon* or doing the Robinson Crusoe bit on an Earthworld. It was time to admit failure; they hadn't found any concentrations of ores which would make their finder's fees worthwhile. If only Captain Chang had not spent so much time bragging in the Martian bars that this would be her last trip. The jackpot. He hadn't told the other two crew members yet, but maybe he should. Before they spent their last days orbiting an alien sun.

Denise Mackenzie pressed her hands into the padded arms of her chair. Her thirst for data went far beyond the limited display available to her. She had been able to track the probe's progress to the third planet. When they had entered the system, a pulse of energy had come from the third planet. A mighty generator had been turned on, then shut off or shielded almost immediately. She'd minored in the much-derided field of xenoarchaeology. There had never been a ruin, a potsherd, any sign that intelligence had blossomed except in man. Few universities even offered the field, and very few of the "xenocranks" had won starships. Her major in mining and metallurgy had won her berth on the *Dragon*. But this time she would surprise them all.

Alan Rosenthal played four games of chess and one of shogi against the gaming computer. He was classed at Planetary Master in the Interplanetary Chess Society. Someday he would be Interplanetary Master, but he would never make Grand Master. He knew himself very well. He was one of the best knowledge engineers in the worlds—certainly the best in the Fitzsimmons-Xibala line. He had done an extensive study of Captain Lee

Chang before he "arranged" to have the computers at corporate headquarters assign him to this two-bit exploration ship. It was so unlikely that Lee Chang would find anything that Alan could devote all his time to the only thing that mattered: the life of the mind. Now that Lee's lady had succeeded him as captain, all bets were off.

Mary Chang came on deck. Her first impulse was to pull the thick black cord from the back of Alan Rosenthal's skull. Alan had perfect faith in the navigational computer to take the ship in. He wouldn't even disconnect his fat body from the endless chess paradise during one of the truly dangerous aspects of space flight. She sat in the copilot's chair and signaled the computer that she wanted the controls unlocked. The levers and buttons of the pilot's chair began to move, as each decision which the computer made was relayed to its analog component. At any time she could lay her hands on the components and fly the *Dragon*, but for now she wanted to watch the ghostly movement of the controls and imagine Lee driving them home.

The *Green Dragon* negotiated the massive gravitational tides of the gas giant Deneb VI. The ship's artificial gravity wasn't quite up to snuff. The crew of four felt the giant's pull as a hint of acceleration and the sudden small field of the pink, pocked moon as a thrilling *ubooosh* as they banked their approach curve to Deneb III.

"Captain," radioed Denise from her lab, "I'm sending a preliminary report on Deneb III."

Mary Chang jacked into the sensory computers of the *Dragon*. A flow of data as pleasant as a warm shower washed over her cerebral lobes. Denise was nothing if not a great data stylist—no doubt betraying her romantic nature. The flood of diameters, gravitational anomalies, maps of magnetic fields could be condensed to a few salient facts. Deneb III was a moonless world with 0.9 Earth gravity, nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, lush vegetation, minimal tectonic-volcanic activity—in other words, an old world, much older than Earth. And best of all, veined with highly valuable industrial minerals.

Maybe the richest find ever.

Certainly the richest find on a world where miners wouldn't have to live in protective domes (barring hostile microorganisms), have all their food shipped in, and have to go on R&R every six months out of mind-breaking boredom.

"Denise," said Mary Chang, "I want you to prepare an economic projection based on the data—best- and worst-case scenarios—and I want you to keep it to yourself until I give an orbital briefing."

"Yes, Cap'n."

Mary Chang activated the command room, a richly furnished, seldom-used chamber of the *Dragon*. It served for communications with corporate headquarters, business meetings and planning sessions for the ship, and those rituals which the social engineers had devised as a mix of psychology and religion to keep the blend of individual/corporate consciousness at an optimal balance. The latter had been lacking. Since Lee's funeral rites the room had been sealed off—airless. She was go-

ing to call for a sumble, the most powerful and dangerous rite that the social engineers had devised. It could break the crew out of the inward-reaching slumber they had been sleepwalking in by presenting them with heroic challenges. Or it could be the stressful shock that drove them to madness. Mary thought it was time for the big gamble. If her crew rallied to the challenge, they could put themselves in positions of wealth and power. The *Green Dragon* would be remembered throughout the twenty-two inhabited planets. If they were too far gone, someone else could claim this wealth.

She had been trained as a knight in the Explorer's Academy. She lived her vows. Wealth and power should go to those who by magnifying themselves would advance the meaning and direction of mankind. If they couldn't rise to the occasion, there was always the self-destruct sequence.

The crew sat around a small table. Except for Alan Rosenthal they looked comfortable in their black dress uniforms. Alan had put on mass, and his buttons strained, threatening to go into their own orbits. One wall showed the planet below. A parallel but shorter wall displayed the corporate logo and the coats of arms of Mary and Lee Chang.

Captain Chang touched a black button. The synthesized sound of a bosun's pipe played, and two panels opened in the table. Nearest to Chang, a polished copper ship's bell rose; in the center of the table was a large brass loving cup full of the heavy wine of Tau Ceti II.

Captain Chang struck the bell and said, "I open this meeting of the *Green Dragon* Exploratory class vessel of the Fitzsimmons-Xibala line. Is there any old business pursuant to our franchise charter as explorers, our legal obligations as explorers which derive from the United Planets Act 93, or of the shipboard activities of the *Green Dragon*?"

There was business, but neither Max Ashton nor Denise Mackenzie spoke. Captain Chang rang the bell. "Is there any new business?"

Silence.

Then Mary Chang said, "Our initial survey of Deneb III indicates that the planet combines a vastly rich assortment of lighter metal ores, industrially significant metals and minerals, and easily minable radioactive heavy metals—all in an environment which potentially can be exploited by miners with a minimum of life-support systems. In short, our finder's fee could set us up for life. Set us up well. Thus I propose we sit at sumble that we may focus our goals and call upon the highest parts of ourselves for aid in dealing with the vast power effectively and ethically."

"Captain," said Max Ashton, "I don't think we need any more stimulus for this job. Sometimes more truth comes out in these things than we really need."

"Let her have her superstitions," said Alan Rosenthal.

"Well, Denise, they've had their say—what do you say?"

Denise hadn't been paying attention. She had been watching the projected image of the planet, hoping to

find with her eyes what the instruments failed to detect. A deep space Angkor Wat, rings inscrutably inspiring and unintelligibly illuminating . . .

"So, since Denise has nothing to add, I say we will sit at sumble. I say that the power such wealth will bring can only be received in truth. Let us sit in silence for a few moments so that the necessary ingredients can rise up in us."

Alan stared with hostility while the others went into trance. The *Green Dragon* circled a third of the orbit.

Captain Chang spoke. "Our awareness transfixes this moment of time. Let Ran, god of deep space, move into our hearts as we summon up our highest selves and move to work at peak human and spiritual endeavor."

She picked up the loving cup.

"I will start this round of toasts to principles with one of my own. I raise the cup to the sense of the hidden. Mankind has always sought what lies beyond the next hill. The sense of the hidden has brought us here. Let us resolve to seek after the mysteries."

She drank, then handed the heavy cup to Alan. He said, "I raise this cup to cataloging, the dry task that makes the worlds comprehensible to us. From cataloging comes true history, the making spiritual of objects." He drank, then passed the cup.

Max Ashton drank to loyalty.

Denise Mackenzie drank to communication, which opens the way between people of different space and time.

The next round was to heroes. Captain Chang drank to the late Captain Chang, and there was an uncomfortableness in the room—since the others remembered him as a fool who almost sacrificed them to a Belatrin cruiser. Alan Rosenthal drank to Moses, who created a destiny in history by lawgiving. Max Ashton drank to Matthew Hanson, who had dragged the ailing Admiral Perry to the North Pole (of the planet Earth) so the latter could be the "first" to discover it. Denise Mackenzie drank to Linda Schele, the archaeologist who had done the most to decode the Mayan hieroglyphics four centuries ago.

Next came the round of boasts, where each could add personal accomplishment to the archetypal/heroic stream thus far invoked. Captain Chang boasted that she had saved the *Dragon* and its crew from the Belatrin. Alan boasted that he had outwitted the Belatrin battle computer, that through his mastery of games he had kept them on the life level of the cosmic chessboard. Max boasted that he had kept the *Dragon* flying even though it was long overdue for an overhaul. (There, he had said it—let them figure it out.) Denise boasted that she had maneuvered her whole life so that she could be sitting here—and this fact would make them all famous. (They all stared at her.)

Then came the fourth and most important round. Oaths. They would say what they would do—calling into being a new adventure to be woven into the mythic/historical/personal stream.

Captain Chang's oath: "I will assay both the planet and the hearts of my crew. If both have hidden within them as much wealth as I believe they have, I will make sure

the *Dragon* returns to her home port of Old Mars to our greater glory."

Alan Rosenthal's oath: "I will go above and beyond my duty. I will make sure this is my last run, and with the wealth I achieve I will have my mind downloaded into the Monastery of Eternal Contemplation satellite."

Max Ashton's oath: "I will prove my loyalty, efficiency, and accomplishment to the one I most value."

Denise Mackenzie's oath: "I will find what mankind has always sought—proof that he is not alone."

No one could speak, no one could ask. It was in the rules of the sumble. Captain Chang closed the rite. "Let us stand and affirm our oaths in the highest tradition of the hero's way. And each in pledging pledges support and challenge to the others."

They placed their hands over the cup. Then Captain Chang struck the bell, and the chirungac of the *Dragon* sank into the table.

Thus they had sealed their fates before the *Gréep Dragon* had even touched ground.

Tash Salin had had his people hide in the trees around the broad valley where he had found the metal. It was spring, and the light purple foliage had begun to appear like fine down on the ancient trees. The people watched the ship slowly touch ground without surprise. Not because they were accustomed to such things—except for their shaman, none among them had the capacity for surprise or wonder. The rare gene that awakened that hunger determined the shaman.

It was long before anyone emerged, but Tash Salin's people were a hunting people and were accustomed to the stalk. When the star folk stepped from the ship, there was fear—for they stood twice the height of the people. But all spears were ready to pierce them, for the people feared the shaman more.

The star folk examined the burned place where the probe had fallen. The shortest among them gestured from earth to sky. The short one had a loud, high voice like the leathery flier that was so good to eat. The other star folk drew away from the loud one.

Tash Salin had had his people remove the fallen metal with as much grace and skill as they could manage, but the short one waved a wand in the air. It determined the path to his foundry. The short one began to go to the foundry. The others returned to the ship. Tash Salin made the silent-language gestures to follow and ten of his best warriors accompanied him.

Let them be mad, thought Denise—probe failure! Mind failure, more likely. They argued that the probe had failed in its initial orbit and had disintegrated on entry. The EM trace was a product of its falling to pieces in the atmosphere. They were scared that the planet might be inhabited. They had no sense of wonder—only greed. If the planet were inhabited, the U.P. might not allow its exploitation. *Didn't they understand? Didn't they know this was what humanity had always sought?*

Small creatures that could be mistaken for terrestrial lizards save for their faceted eyes scurried ahead of her

into the brush. Were there other noises? An insect landed on her neck and stung. A small computer at the base of her hypothalamus began producing the specific antitoxin as soon as the alien proteins floated by. In addition to making the antitoxin, it recorded the structure and amount of the poisons and transmitted it to a computer on the *Dragon* as data on the chemical and pharmacological properties.

Were there other noises? The EM trace grew stronger. She could smell smoke. She was approaching a small rise out of the valley—the purple furze on the trees was more pronounced here. She stopped, closed her eyes, and opened the link with the survey computer via a biochip grown in her right back brain. This hill—her right brain and the computer made a match with survey photos—this hill was a near-perfect rhomboid; could it be a tell? Its structure and size were different from others in the area. She would get to the top and plant some sensors. She opened her eyes and saw a short ugly blue creature pointing a spear at her.

Suddenly four years of training drained away, and she was terrified.

The creature stood slightly over one meter in height, and with the exception of its slate-blue color resembled a squid more than any other terrestrial creature. Its eight arms were without suckers, and apparently possessed a bonelike or cartilagelike structure running through most of their length. The last fifteen centimeters or so formed an extremely flexible "finger" in a repulsive lavender shade.

A second creature emerged from the forest. It whistled, and the first made a pointing gesture with the metal-tipped spear. Denise began to walk, slowly, in the direction indicated. She was trying to remember the mantra which would activate the SOS biochip. The second creature had two eyes, set almost like a human's. The first had three eyes, sacrificing depth perception for three-sixty vision. It was an astonishing diversity in a species—if these were of the same species.

The two placed themselves in front and behind her. They traveled through the forest a few hundred yards to a small village among the trees. About thirty of the creatures milled around—carrying baskets of gourds, or working on incomprehensible projects. The two-eyed one, which seemed to be the lone representative of binocular vision, wrapped one of his "fingers" around her arm and pulled her toward one of the low-domed huts. As she stepped into the smoky interior, she remembered the SOS mantra, but she didn't want to use it.

Not yet.

On the floor of the hut, a round metal disk covered an entrance to the netherworld.

Max had returned to the ship in anger. He couldn't believe that Denise had outright disobeyed the captain's order. Worse still, Mary just shrugged and told her that it was on her own head. He knew that Mary had the highest respect for individuality, but surely this wasn't the time.

He felt safer in the ship. People couldn't wander so

far away. In the ship he could prove himself to Mary. The bridge was humming nicely. Data poured in from the three crewmen outside and from the ship itself.

Engineering was a different matter. The daimon of the ship was dying. It was a package of energy which existed between the matter and antimatter flows with causal and synchronous roots in both the sublight and translight dimensions. The daimon permitted the ship to slip from sub- to trans- as an integrated, meaningful structure. It looked ahead to its own future states to pull itself from a configuration of stability to another configuration of stability. In popular lingo, it rode on the luck of the universe. But now the daimon was losing its complexity. It couldn't find a future state of itself, and so its geometry had begun to simplify. Max increased the ship's power output by sixty-four percent. The matter/antimatter reaction was safe now; even the simplest of daimons could handle that. He pushed the gain on the daimon's search. Perhaps it could find a future state on the outer limits of its space-time probability cloud. If not, he lacked the energy to create a new daimon—you needed as much power to fold that complexity in Hilbert as the power you were folding. If the daimon didn't find itself in the future, the *Dragon* would simply become a nova-like blast when it tried to pass into translight.

In the meantime he jacked into the main library and began downloading all the physics and philosophy of the ages.

Captain Chang and Alan had begun the routine series of chores involved in setting up a base. They activated a flock of small robots—crawlers, creepers, flyers, burrowers, each becoming the eyes and ears of the *Dragon*. Sometimes the breath and claws as well. A small stream flowed nearby. Alan activated a swimmer and a skimmer.

"So, Alan, are you ready for the name game?"

"Naming is a captain's prerogative. Besides, you know me: Fischer Hills, Casablanca River, Queen's Gambit Pass."

"I'm not big on naming, either. It always seems to me that naming's too passive. These myths of earlier times with God doing all the work and just letting man catalog things. I've always wanted to be a participant in creation."

"Those myths, Captain, are from my people. I am descended from three hundred generations of learned Jews. But I'm like you; I would have chosen knowledge over naming. Maybe we'll get our young archaeologist to do the nomenclature. She'll name the hills, and we'll make our maps. If her tribe is ever reborn in another starfaring race, they can dig up those maps."

"Don't have much faith in her."

"Oh. I share her hopes. Hopes do not faith make."

Alan and Captain Chang began the on-site inspection. She went west. He went east. He trudged into the purple-furred woods. *I would call these the Ruy Lopez Woods*, he thought. There was something shiny up ahead. Nothing to worry about; a lake most likely. He deviated from the straight course. If it was a lake, he had a couple of fish to release.

He stepped beyond the woods. For an instant the

shiny flat surface seemed to be a vast eye meters across; then its surface changed and it became a chessboard.

Alan felt a tingling on the back of his head. *It's communicating to me through my I/O port*. But the lure of the game, the championship match he'd lose on Mars, overcame all else. That game had been working inside him for months. This time he would win.

Captain Chang continued west out of the woods into a slightly marshy area covered in fine purple down. She regretted each footstep she took as it tore through the purple field and left a reddish-brown mud track in its wake. She was worried about her crew. Max seemed to be on his way to an over-devoted state of puppy love; Denise had pledged herself to an archaeological fantasy; Alan had never been reliable—always shunning power and knowledge in the real world for big-fish status in the chess world. None of them broke free from their sleep even with the excitement awaiting them here. Was she any better?

She was getting into wetter territory. She decided to call Alan and have him bring a swimmer. She thought the mantra that turned on the communications biochip.

"Alan. Alan. Are you there?"

"Mary, honey, it's me, Lee."

The blue octopoid made no protest as Denise pried open the disk. Air poured up from the darkness, warm and stale. The walls of the shaft seemed perfectly smooth, so she couldn't climb down. She'd activated her link with the *Dragon* and was sending data on all channels.

After several minutes she could hear a mechanical sound from the shaft. The two-eyed octopoid watched her with what seemed to be curiosity. The others had not been disturbed by her arrival in the village. None waited outside the hut. They seemed to be busy at weapon-making. Denise wondered if they were about to go to war with another tribe. She could see a light in the shaft. Something was coming up. What had begun as a point of light began to fill the whole shaft. An illuminated disk, covered in an acrylic, rose to the top of the shaft.

Denise guessed that it was some sort of service cluster. She stepped onto the platform and it began to sink. As soon as her head was beneath the end of the tube, the blue octopoid replaced the metal disk—cutting her off from the upper world.

Max had reached the decision that the *Dragon* would remain sublight; that meant never leaving the solar system. He would call Captain Chang. They would set up a colony. When mankind sent another probe here in fifty or five hundred years, his and Mary's descendants would have tamed this planet. Sex poured into him like hot lead—this was the thrill of exploring. He switched to radio contact with Mary Chang, but his erection quickly wilted as he heard:

"Most of my body found its way here. It's being rebuilt in the center of the planet."

"How could it have, Lee? Your escape vehicle got lasered light-years from here. Even if your body floated in this direction, it would take millennia to reach here."

"It's a miracle, lover. Heaven knows you prayed for it enough."

"I don't believe in miracles. And I don't believe in you, either."

"How can I convince you?"

"I would need to see you, to talk with you, to taste you."

"This will happen soon enough. Ancient machines deep within the planet are fixing me now. My consciousness is in some kind of holding area; when they detected you on the surface, they patched a radio line."

"So these all-wise machines know that you're you and I'm me. How convenient. I think it's a little more likely that it's a cruel Rosenthal joke and I'm talking to the main computer on the *Dragon*."

"I can tell you what we said on our wedding night."

"So can the main computer, since we spent it on the *Dragon*."

Max checked the computer. It was entirely in input mode. Had Lee returned from cold death?

Alan judged his opponent's midgame as excellent. It wasn't a surprising pyrotechnic style, but a cool, logical strategy that he could sink his teeth into. With his queen's bishop he initiated a sly attack that should give him control of the midboard in three moves.

His unseen opponent acted like lightning, seemingly leaving his queen unguarded.

Alan couldn't see the danger in taking the queen, but in the two games he had played with the unseen opponent he had come to respect him. This must be a subtle gambit. To gain time, Alan asked, "How do you move so quickly?"

"If a slight adjustment was made in you, you could move much more quickly and we would have time for millions of games."

"An adjustment?"

"I could perform it now if you wish; it won't disturb your concentration."

"Do so, then." Alan decided that his opponent had erred, and prepared to take the opposing queen with his knight. There was a cracking sound from the back of Alan's neck, and the game went over so much more quickly afterwards.

Denise had gotten quite nauseated because of the descent. The luminous disk had gone out, and the stale air no longer seemed exciting—just stale. She suspected that the ship wasn't receiving her data. She had made a mistake. She had assumed that the shaft was an elevator for a being roughly like herself—a being that couldn't take several minutes of descent. If the disk rose at the same rate it descended, it must have started on its ascent several minutes before her arrival at the octopoid's hut.

That meant someone/thing knew she was coming.

The descent stopped.

She reached out and found only air. She had left the shaft. Gingerly she placed her right foot ahead of her in the darkness. It passed an inch beneath the level of the

disk, and she swallowed hard; it passed another inch and touched a smooth surface. Suddenly the space was filled with light. She was in a vast domed area—the disk had left the shaft minutes ago. She could've fallen had she moved or swayed, or the rate of descent changed. Several tall cylinders stood around her. They began to chime softly like bells in the distance. A warmth caressed her. These alien ones wanted her. The warmth became a vibration and crawled up her thighs.

This was it—the first contact she'd always dreamed of. Just as the vibrations reached a climax, a deep, cultured English voice said, "We're ready for your questions now."

An alarm note cut in on Mary Chang's chat with the dead. Alan Rosenthal's life signs no longer appeared in the datafield. She requested his last coordinates. Medibots were already there. Alan's head had been twisted clear around. She told Lee, "Whoever or whatever you are, I don't have time for ghosts right now."

She switched off the radio as he said, "But I can save him."

Max, who had been listening at the *Dragon*, took up the dialogue. "You can't save nobody. She thinks you launched the escape pod to lure the Belatrin away from us, but I saw your face—you were crazy scared."

"The past isn't an issue. I have crossed space and returned from the dead. I am your new hope."

"We have quite enough trouble with our old hopes. Lee Chang will not a messiah be."

"You've got to accept me. Mary's love is the law. She won't leave this planet even if she could."

"I'll see to it we leave."

"Max, you're a little sorry bastard that's been giving Mary the widow's privilege. I set my will against your engines and snuff them out like a candle."

"Whatever you are, you aren't mild-mannered Lee Chang. I didn't run away in a fight—so if it comes to a matter of will, the *Dragon* will fly light-centuries from this place."

Max turned off the link. The daimon had lost most of its complexity. Max decided that he would rather die than remain in this ghost land, and the decision set him free. Within two minutes all the robots and servomechanisms of the *Dragon* were busy under his command. With the flash of laser light, he began cutting his way around banks of safety circuits and fail-safes. It was time, Max reasoned, for a little applied philosophy.⁴

After her second climax, Denise fought to regain her breath. She must question, because with questions came the flood of pleasure—the waves of pure communication.

"Why did the leader possess two eyes and the others three?"

"When the race above evolved to a level to accept the gift of sentence, we decided to give it to them with the hope that they could fulfill our purposes in the fullness of time. It was a dismal failure. The three-eyes became great data collectors. They could muse endlessly over what they saw, smelled, tasted, heard, touched. So

we opened up the shafts to the surface. We captured. We experimented. We made the two-eyes. By removing the unlimited vision, we created curiosity. The two-eyes want to know what is behind them. With binocular vision, they learned that things need to be considered from more than one perspective in order to be seen. We had created the need to seek. We have no curiosity, only purpose. We watched the race above, and saw we could not achieve our goals with them, but we learned what to look for."

She swooned with waves of pleasure. She would surely die from her curiosity.

The medibots reported an unusually quick degeneration of brain tissue. Not only could he not be revived, they couldn't cause the tissue to replay his last few minutes of consciousness.

Captain Chang ordered them to do as extensive a forensic autopsy as their programs and equipment allowed—followed by a centimeter-by-centimeter scanning of the area by mapping and exploratory robots. Then burial and monuments according to crewman Rosenthal's religious and ethnic customs.

For a moment she felt herself being watched, and she gave the small lake a suspicious look. Something blue moved among the purple-furred bushes across the lake—and perhaps she saw a flash of metal. She tried to raise the ship and had no response. She tried to raise Denise, and no response.

So she was alone, and this was the moment of decision. Two of the exploratory robots were armed; she ordered them to attend her.

She began a walk around the lake. The medibots called her and told her that human hands—or at least structures identical to them—had twisted Alan's neck.

Max was discovering that the ship's surgery was the hardest to overcome. So he welded the doors shut, so he wouldn't be "rescued" halfway through the procedure. He was feeding all the human anatomy data to the maintenance robots. After all, a system's a system.

The robots drew their weapons, but the three-eyed octopoids showed no change in their movements. Captain Chang ordered the robots to remain ready to fire. They followed the octopoids through the purple forest. The octopoids gathered a small rose-beige fruit from some of the bushes. Occasionally they would put the fruit in the mouth in the center of their arms. Captain Chang noted to her disgust that the same orifice also served for excretion. The octopoids seemed in no way hurried or distressed by their presence. Captain Chang wondered if they had the sentence their baskets suggested, or if they were merely the trained pets of a human master—the human who had killed Alan?

Denise lay in a sweaty, semiconscious heap. She figured she might be able to manage two more questions. Maybe three.

"Who made you?"

"The Exiled One made us and gave us our one purpose. Now we stand closest to fulfilling that purpose."

"Who is the Exiled One?"

"He is that power which ever wills the evil but procures only the good."

"What will happen to me?"

A small dot appeared in front of her eyes. *A period*, she thought, *it's a period*. It grew and grew until it was all she saw. *So dark*, she thought. *I don't want to get lost in this darkness*. Then, after forever, there was a dot of light that grew to be the Absolute Star.

The octopoids had filled their baskets. They began walking through the woods—surprisingly gracefully, Captain Chang thought. She followed with her robots. After a while they came to a small village. All of this should've been picked up by the ship's sensors. A massive cover-up was in place here, Mary suspected.

She walked on the hard-packed earth, her presence not disturbing the octopoids who prepared the recently harvested vegetables in clay pots, repaired the domed huts with gray clay, or wove what appeared to be fishing nets. A group of octopoids pounded bright metal points for spears. Mary guessed that this was the remains of the probe.

The robots suddenly stopped moving.

Someone/something whistled from behind a hut.

Six blue octopoids moving fast like spiders in a nightmare came from behind the huts. Armed with spears, they surrounded Mary in a perfectly choreographed maneuver. She ordered the robots to fire, but as she expected, nothing happened. The sound of metal on metal came from a nearby hut. Then Lee stepped out. Not Lee as she had last seen him—nervous, pale, beginning to age—but a transmogrified Lee in his knightly robes of the Academy: the Lee of her freshman dreams spangled with lust and notions of chivalry. No gray in his hair, no uncertainty in his sloe eyes, no stains or wrinkles in his hunter's green uniform.

"Honey, I've got to make you listen to me," he said.

"At spearpoint?" she said.

"Many things have happened and I need you to know all of them before you make your decision."

"I'll listen, but you're doing nothing to make your case easier."

Lee whistled a complex melody. The octopoids pointed their spears at the dust, but did not retreat. A two-eyed octopoid rushed out from the same hut from which Lee had emerged. It carried a small aluminum and vinyl stool in four of its arms. It set this seat behind Mary and padded off.

She sat.

Lee said, "All I remember is fleeing the *Dragon*. I thought the escape pod would be hidden by the *Dragon's* mass. I don't even remember the Belatrin blast which must've followed. The creatures—the machines that dwell in the heart of this world—found me. They were looking for a recently dead sentient being. They brought me here and they brought you here as well by manipulating Alan during the escape sequence. They offer resurrection.

They were made to preserve life, but their makers died in a germ war before the process was perfected. These machines in their singleminded way have perfected the process, at least almost. They can raise the dead provided they're in good contact with someone carrying a perfect model of the dead—someone who loved or hated the dead very much."

"And they didn't have such an individual for Alan or Denise."

"We'll have to be very careful whom we let land here. We?"

"Well, I can't leave, and I'm hoping you'll join me. This place can be Eden."

While Lee was speaking, the two-eyed octopoid had returned carrying a large green flower—a large green rose complete with wicked-looking purple thorns. He held it up for Mary, but she didn't take it.

Lee continued, "We can fill this planet with loving couples in undying bliss. The machines will have/fulfilled their purpose, and we will see the flowering of two racial dreams—the dreams of the makers and of humankind."

Mary looked him over. "And we'll be living in a perpetual youth?"

"Unchanging. Undying. Happy."

It would be quite a rest, she thought. Excellent, if we were made for resting.

"Nice try," she said, "but you aren't Lee. You may or may not be made from him, but Lee and I agreed long ago that marriage was growth and love, not just love. We pledged to explore one another and all the mysteries beyond. Lee wouldn't agree to Eden."

Lee smiled and said, "Sufficient."

The octopoid whipped Mary's cheek with the rose.

She turned to strike back, and suddenly was very woozy. The ground rushed up.

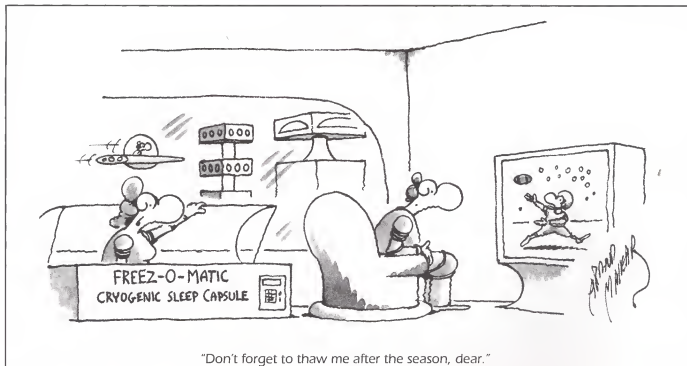
When she woke in the darkness she hurt very, very much. Something had cut off her left arm just below the elbow. Something metal took the place of arm—long and tapered like a spear. As pain took her back to unconsciousness she heard—or thought she heard—"And the Black Knight became the Red Knight."

She hurt much less, and she was hungry. She opened her eyes; she lay in the center of a vast domed hall. Around her stood scores of silver cylinders. A chiming rose from them which became a voice in her mind.

"You showed bravery, curiosity, and determination. The ideas within you caused you to seek the good. We couldn't distract you even with the illusion of love. The spear which we welded to you is a symbol of will. In addition, it can be used as a weapon—allowing you to tap nearly stellar quantities of power. Our maker wanted to see individual will empowered to the maximum, and we have made this possible. Release what is within you and allow your will to send ripples through the galaxy like a stone in a stagnant pond. We allowed everyone to fulfill their desires. Alan will play endless chess, Denise was filled to bursting with an alien civilization, Max sacrificed himself to you by becoming the new daimon of the *Green Dragon*. You alone wanted more than Eden, so we have fulfilled our mandate by giving you near-infinite will. May you never be content. Our job is done."

As the platform on which she rested began to rise, the cylinders began to melt.

When she reached the surface, she began to walk to the *Dragon* and to all of Allternity beyond. ♦



Saharan Surprise

J. A. Pollard

Cold, of course, but nothing like Maine. Palm trees tall and feathery, prickly pear dull green, the olive groves, oranges, the lemons and the grapefruit lush and fruiting. And outside, against the whitewashed mud-brick walls, poinsettias are blooming. Ah . . .

Red dust
under the whitewashed wall

Poinsettias make it almost look like Christmas!

Tripoli, Libya: northern edge of the great Sahara, southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. December. I am hugely pregnant and homesick for America. I am dreaming. There is the smell of fir, wedding-cake look

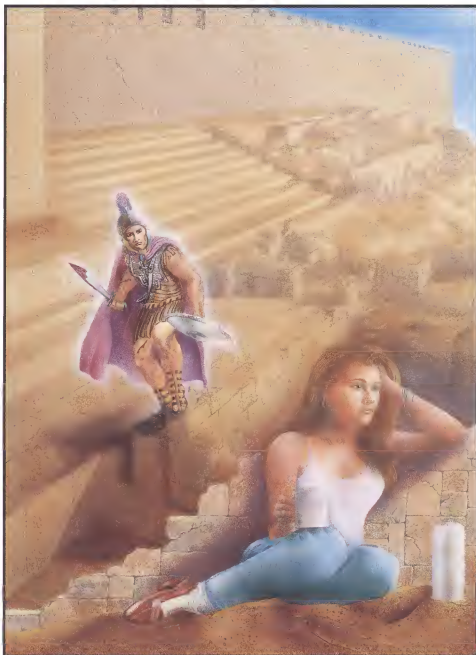


Illustration by Richard Mandrachio

of snow on field. Black crows in cobalt sky. But only in the mind. Reality is desert.

We are planning to attend midnight mass on Christmas Eve at the Catholic cathedral, my husband and I. It's the only place left after Colonel Quaddafi's coup. The Anglican church in Tripoli's post office square is silent and a museum for Arab memories. Furtive groups of Christians meet in private homes. But Spain has threatened to close every mosque in Madrid if this last outpost of Christendom is closed; and every European in Tripoli is going to attend midnight mass on Christmas Eve, Catholic or not!

My husband is a Quaker. I exist in a state of suspended disbelief. I'm mystical, earth-loving and belong to no sect. As long as I can remember, December in Maine where I was born, grew up, has always been a time of magic when souls slide down the darkest depths of the dying year; when sunlight hides, and night falls fast at four o'clock each afternoon; when ice glues deep and shining stars to every tree and roof. An indoor time: a state of silverware and dishes, cooking, flowers on the table, gifts, friend-greeting, fir-bough decorating.

I suppose these Christmases were pagan, church pageants notwithstanding . . .

The blue sky aching over all
and olive trees no longer tall--

What'll I put in for the next line?

. . . where I was swathed in muslin, marched down aisles between old-fashioned white-backed pews with tinsel in my hair, singing "Joy to the World" at the top of shy young lungs; going to meet an immature, self-conscious Mary crouched by a slightly soiled rubber doll wrapped in something we imagined to be swaddling clothes; beside an embarrassed, gangling Joseph leaning precariously on a staff of just-cut maple. There were shepherds: all the misbehaving boys. And kings turned out in orange, green, and blue like peacocks, carrying something hardly resembling gold or frankincense or myrrh. And there were presents; yes; and, in my living room, a long and tannish stocking like a disembodied bowel pinned against a chair for Santa Claus to fill. And there were nuts in bowls you had to crack with special hammers; Christmas candy curled and thin and very brittle.

Mostly I remember sounds: the creaking of the little Cape Cod house in stiff frigidity; the sound my father's feet made as they hit the cold linoleum of bedroom floor; the rustle of his dressing; then, most glorious of all, the clangor of the iron stove, the crack of match that lit the quick wood fire! I would shriek, then, to my mother's bed, shivering with anticipation, joy and agony; hauling along my loaded stocking, trying to ignore the glory of the fir tree shimmering and hunched (like Mary) over the exquisite shining doll which waited.

It was mad! Ecstatic! An amalgam of the baby Jesus and his mother, carpenters and shepherds, kings and sheep—the tinkling of reindeer feet upon our roof. Oh, surely joy incarnate!

What shall the next line be, then?

(Poinsettias red against the wall
the red dust permeating . . .)

Is 'all' too obvious?

(Poinsettias red against the wall
the red dust permeating all)

That'll be the end, then. Red dust permeating all— Red dust, ancient . . .

whirling in before . . .

What shall I tell my husband about this baby? What can I ever reveal?

Red fear permeating all?

Tripoli is dusty, chilly, alien: place of memory and bones. Outpost of mucus, muscle, anything damp, pulsing, set against skeletal sand. Like Ghadames. Three-thousand-year-old Ghadames with its bee-hive, mud-brick buildings built around the *Ain El Fress* oasis, down there in the deep Sahara where Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia fit together in view of one another like corners of a little puzzle.

Ain El Fress, meaning "spring of the mare." Because of legend. Most likely "spring of the camel."

I'll tell you about it. You won't repeat it, yes?

It began easily enough. A word said here, a suggestion there, and soon a German couple in their car had joined us in our car driving to Ghadames. Nine hours south. Road out of Tripoli full of potholes for half the distance, the last half smooth and fine. So that you knew the builders destroyed the first while building the last. Amusing. Like everything in Libya. Where nothing works. Where the "Libyan Effect" distorts machinery, maddens oilmen.

And Ghadames, of course, that ancient beehive of a slave center—where I couldn't endure the empty sellers' market under the mulberry tree because I could hear the women screaming—like knives slicing sour lemons. Where guilt oozed. *Poor Lady Macbeth washing her hands over and over—the Arabs can never wash—*

I ran out of the beehive, for that is what Ghadames is like: room piled on room with tunnels underneath which are cool in summer, warm in winter. Telling my husband only about fear, nothing about screaming. Christians do not believe in past lives. Or time wars.

It was a curious experience, Ghadames, peering into the rock-walled oasis pool, hearing the surge of artesian pumps which were draining the aquifer, lowering water table, probably ending any possibility of life there in the future.

I wonder what it was like in A.D. 235. When Romans ruled.

I have to stop the story. There is such a thing as too much memory.

* * *

We are also going to the oil company's school for a concert. Besides midnight mass at the Catholic cathedral. The streets of Tripoli are strung with multicolored lights, like Christmas in Maine, but not for Christmas. They are perennial: flowers of western holiday which Libyans force to bloom year-round. They represent, to me, one of the sad appropriations typical of much third-world parroting: the adoption of superficial western technology but without its depth, its *raison d'être*. We will go to the Spanish cathedral through lines of gaily colored lights looking like an American downtown. *Does it matter?*

Does what happened matter?

Poetry, after all, is everything. Let's try again.

Red dust
under the whitewashed wall
The blue sky aching over all
and olive trees no longer tall--

I sat beside the presses,
belly ripe with child,
sloughed into slumbering . . .

"Sloughed into slumbering."

Before the . . . ?

No.

Lines of Christmas-tree lights along Mediterranean streets where little donkeys trot beside big, black Mercedes Benzes which look dangerous.

Little donkeys. With their ears banging to either side. Stoical. Bad-humored. Sad, perhaps. And with pentises so long they nearly touch the ground.

But I shall tell you about the desert.

The fort at Ghadames, the fort the Romans built, was situated on top of a three-hundred-foot-high monadnock which erupted from the plain abruptly. Do you get the picture? We are looking at it from the cars which have been parked at the foot, looking up and wondering. There is a big hole in its side and we scramble up to investigate. It's a tunnel. It has been dug into the side of the monadnock horizontal to the ground and intersecting a vertical shaft which seems to have been dug from the top to ground level. Like a well. Which is what it was.

The Romans had built a fortress atop the monadnock, and we could see the crumbled lines of walls everywhere. Big stones on the outside, smaller on the inside, rubble in between. We consulted guidebooks. It was an outpost of *limitanei* settlement. The *limitanei* were Libyan veterans who, after completing their service with the Roman army, were granted plots of tax-free land together with slaves and livestock in return for defending their territory against barbarian incursions. Which meant nomads from deeper in the desert. We're at the *limitanei* limit. Outpost. And somewhere back in time barbarians incurred, cutting off Roman water supply.

I can picture battle. I can picture dying of thirst while the enemy swarms around your feet! *Oh, father, forgive them, for they know not—*

I am left to sit atop the monadnock while the others wander into Algeria for sand roses. Which are elegant concretions formed when moisture in the sand evaporates upward, and in its movement causes sand to crystallize into petal-shapes.

Lovely!

I sit atop the monadnock amidst the ruins, a thin, young woman from America who can hear the screams of slaves. I jingle my silver bracelets and brush off flies. I have blue eyes and long, brown hair and I am mystical and earth-loving. But I belong to no sect. And all of a sudden, as I watch where the others have trekked off into dunes hunting for sand roses with shovels—

Wait a moment. How about this?

I sat beside the presses,
belly ripe with child,
sloughed into slumbering
like Eden, ripe . . .

I'm talking about olive presses, of course. Those wonderful constructions of ancient vintage. "Vintage" fits. As in grapes. Wine. And now oil. I'm talking about sitting beside a two-thousand-year-old olive press with a baby in my belly and feeling butterfly kicks. Try it sometime.

Libya was not a nice place to be pregnant in.

Red dust
under the whitewashed wall
The blue sky aching over all
and olive trees no longer tall--

I sat beside the presses,
belly ripe,
sloughed into slumbering . . .

There's a bit more to this poem if I can find it.

Expatriates, and there are many of us, feel constrained. Even my husband, who teaches geology at the University of Tripoli, one of many faculty members as well as oil company technicians imported from Europe and America—and necessary to a Libya which wishes ultimately to support itself—is loved and hated simultaneously. As a western woman I am particularly loathed and yet desired. Libyan men watch all the vice and violence of Hollywood and are convinced that western women are as easily obtainable, hence obviously evil. And if they rape you it's because you have seduced them. Just like in the movies.

I have often been molested, even while holding my husband's arm on Tripoli's main streets. I feel humiliated and violated. From a known Maine poet it is obvious that, to the ordinary Libyan male, I am nothing but a piece of meat. It is said, you know, that a Moslem's wife is of less importance than his camel. The same applies to Christian men. Unadmitted. But substitute car or boat or snowmobile for camel.

What can the end of the poem be?

My thoughts turn often, this approaching Christmas in Libya, to Mary, approaching Bethlehem in Judea. She

mirror, seeing my face drawn and pale with pregnancy, dark circles under my eyes, whispering, "At last! At last! This is finally Christmas!" And, at the same time, feeling utterly helpless, floating, unable to believe I am still in Libya.

I go to breathe fresh air at an opened door before rejoining my husband and the choristers.

"Silent night, Holy night" floats out to me.

My husband wouldn't believe—

I stand there, holding the door of the American school building slightly ajar, and lean into chill African darkness. Far away a wild dog barks. As it did when the ancient Roman knelt at my feet gulping lukewarm tea nine months ago in faraway Ghadames. Overhead a palm tree rasps. It is very dark. The sky seems deep, but, though it's late, still slightly blue. Stars glitter. *They say, you know, some people say His father was a Roman soldier.* I know exactly how he would have looked. What type of armor, helmet, sandals, sword.

"Mary!" I think distractedly. And hold my abdomen while the little one flutters. "Mary!"

She came to Bethlehem in a place and night like this one, jouncing on that donkey, hunched, probably, over her abdomen as I am over mine. Around her thrashed the palms. I remember donkey riders, men whose legs drag nearly to the ground. On either side of donkey's belly hang baskets containing alfalfa, garden produce. The men are slight, dark skinned, wearing white leggings and old shoes, sometimes sandals; sometimes a tattered, blue, western-style jacket; often a cap without a brim, embroidered. They will be intent on business, and

the donkey will be intent on moving—as if it couldn't care. And sometimes the man will wear a white, woolen, toga-type cape clasped at one shoulder, and the cape will flutter out behind him gracefully.

I look into Libyan night, remembering the desert, remembering Ghadames, how olive trees glisten in the sun, seeing dusty Saharan soil sifting on the step, hearing the wind in palms, feeling the cold night sky—and think that I am seeing, for the first time, true Christmas. And I sink into it, letting my mind reel back to that far-away day, still so close to us, when a young girl rode her donkey through the desert night with palm trees clacking and the stars bright: when she had ridden into history, and all the world took notice.

As it will never notice me.

I can't tell anyone this child I bear is not my husband's. Can I? That after tea the Roman—

Red dust
under the whitewashed wall
The blue sky aching over all
and olive trees no longer tall--

I sat beside the ruins,
belly ripe for child,
sloughed into slumbering
like Eden, ripe before the Fall
(Poinsettias red against the wall
the red dust permeating all)

Like Eden, ripe before the Fall ♦

About the Authors

Charles Sheffield, writing in the recently released anthology *The Super Hugos*, calls **Barry B. Longyear** "a highly variable writer." Readers of this magazine can certainly agree with that assessment, based on the three diverse stories that Barry has had in these pages over the last eight months. His latest, "Chimaera," may be the most powerful piece of short fiction he has done in a long time—perhaps even on a par with "Enemy Mine," his novella that won both the Hugo and the Nebula Awards in 1980. That story is once more in print, in the aforementioned anthology, so you can make your own determination about how this new story compares with it.

With the appearance of "The Coming of the Spear," **Don Webb** joins the group of writers who made their professional debuts in *AMAZING*®. Stories and have now also appeared

in the full-sized magazine. Don's first sale was "Securities and Personal Word," which came out in our September 1986 issue.

J. A. Pollard says she has lived in some strange parts of the world. Although she doesn't specify them, it's safe to assume that she wrote "Saharan Surprise" after spending some time in North Africa. This is her second story for us, following "The Flag Burners" in the January 1992 issue.

"The Master of Steam" was a prize-winning story before it was a published story. **G. R. Hail** used it to win a writing contest sponsored by Galaxy Fair '92, and shortly thereafter used it to make his first professional sale.

Bill Johnson is obviously an author who believes in taking his time and getting it right. "If I get two stories

out in a year," he says, "I'm doing very, very good for me." Most of his sales have been to *Analog*; "Send Random Romantic" is his lucky 13th published short story, and his second piece for this magazine (preceded by "Solstice" in the July 1986 issue).

In addition to being an author in this issue, **Marc Laidlaw** is also the subject of an essay by George Zebrowski, "Laidlaw Rising." It serves as a fine companion piece for "Taxi Hag"—which is not really a story in itself, but a small slice of Marc's upcoming novel, *Kalifornia*. Take our word for it: the rest of the book is every bit as strange as the chapter we're previewing here.

Finally, we bid a wistful adieu to Joe Doe in the last installment of "A Trail of Surewould Forest" by **Thomas M. Disch**—further proof of the adage that all good things do have to end. ♦

The Master of Steam



G. R. Hail

The moon full above me, I walk with a solitary purpose. The night is cold and windy. I pull my cloak tighter around my shoulders. November rains have made the Parisian streets a mix of mud and political pamphlets, seasoned by the afternoon emptying of slop pots. The citizens are in their homes, hidden behind shut windows and bolted doors. The poor have scuttled to their secret hiding places. My boots squish through the muck and click on infrequent paving stones, betraying my presence in an otherwise empty night.

The airs of Paris have the smell of streets mixed with fear. The government has chosen to populate Louisiana by kidnapping the rabble off the streets. Labbé has been charged with this duty, granted a golden purse by the king, and appointed a constable of police. It is his men who salt the air with fear. They roam the poorer quarters between the twilight and the dawn, hiding in doorways and in alleys, ready with their clubs and carts.

The people hate the king for the terror he has ordered upon them, but the nobles and merchants hate streets cluttered with urchins and beggars more, and they have the ear of the king. It is in the nature of roy-

Illustration by Nicholas Jainschigg

alty that it must always act unjustly. When the involuntary exiles rise to correct the injustices done to them, France will lose Louisiana. Yet the citizens will not be able to return home. They will seek freedom and find our arms open to embrace them. Louisiana will be made into many states, not one named for a king. In preparation, I have drawn up a list of states' names for suggestion to the legislature. Names fashioned from Washington's, Jefferson's, and my own name are on that list.

The moon is bright, glazing the puddles and stones with silver. As I walk up the street, I see that a beggar has left his bowl next to a wall, but has not forgotten to take the coins. At this intersection yesterday a policeman of Constable Labbé's was beaten to death by a mob enraged over the disappearance of a child. Streaks of black blood are still evident on the brickwork. Mob violence is a terrible recourse, but these people have no other.

I have to be careful. I do not wear my powdered wig. Under my cloak, I dress in the borrowed clothes of a low-born merchant: a frock coat with a rent in back sewn closed with off-color thread, worn breeches that I have tucked into my boots to prevent the muck from spattering them, and a round hat. My disguise has fooled the royal spies who watch over me. To them I am dangerous: an American in France, a democrat among royalists, a free thinker in a Catholic nation. In moon-shadow I am as vulnerable as the rabble to being abducted aboard an exile-ship bound for Louisiana.

I cross the street to avoid an alleyway.

Tonight I am neither philosopher nor diplomat, but a spy for my country's science. Philadelphia has several steam engines, of the Newcomen model, which are sluggish and inefficient. What they do can hardly be dignified by the term "work." The new English steam engines are different. James Watt has invented a design which none of my spies could uncover. Despite our theoretical independence, America is at the mercy of Britain's factories. The English engineers will not immigrate, nor will they sell their knowledge.

I must gather that knowledge where I can. I have corresponded with a Parisian known to me as the Master of Steam. He promises his discoveries are superior to those of the English. I intend to capitalize on the recent alliances between our governments which have profited America and France and harmed Great Britain.

I find his shop along the Rue des Drômes. From the flaking paint on the window, I read the Master's shop had once been a bakery. Now the windows are boarded from the inside. Rusted poles that once supported an awning stick out from the brickwork. There is an empty hole by the door through which a bell cord had once been threaded.

The moon dims behind a cloud like an oil lamp deprived of fuel. The November wind takes another bite. I hammer against the door. A lock unbolts with such fury that the wooden door shakes. Agony tempers the cry of "Enter!" which follows. I push open the door, expecting to find Pantagruel inside.

The night is dispelled by fiery lamps lining the walls, which cook the smells of the street while adding their

own stuffiness. The giant has not opened the door. The room is empty but for an unkempt display case, a workbench, and its stool. The workshop appears too tiny for the Master's researches, but at its back I sight another door.

The Master calls to me, "Shut the door for me, please, Sir." To my right, on a high stool, he hunches over his workbench. His body quivers and shakes. Though his hair is not grey, he has the airs of an old man about to die. A bloodied bandage below his right eye seems as if it would obstruct his vision of the jumble of brass cogs and pins on his workbench.

"A trick of mine, but a necessary one." He indicates a switch underneath his workbench. "I admit only those I can see in my mirror." Above his head a tiny round mirror holds the image of the street in front of his shop.

When I have the door soundly shut, the bolt closes of its own initiative, though I did nothing to the door and the Master had his attention upon the brass workings.

The Master's shop is warm. I remove my cloak and lay it over a case that had once exhibited pastries but which is now full of toy brass cannon and wooden soldiers, all carefully carved and cast. As much as their mothers mourn the absence of the bakery, the children of the streets must love this place.

The Master turns his attention from the miniature engine he builds. His body remains hunched. He says over his shoulder, "Yes, Sir Frank—"

I interrupt him. It is important he knows who has the better standing here. "Ben," I say. "We Americans no longer affect British address."

He fixes me with his right eye, bloody in its socket. After a moment, a smile crosses his face, but it quickly disappears when it reaches the bandage. "Many have said you are a man of science."

"What you have heard is correct."

"Then I have a gift for you." The Master of Steam raises himself from his workbench. "It is a mechanical device for instruction in astronomy." When he steps off his stool, he reveals himself a broken man. He twists his neck to look up at me. "This is an astronomical machine that could be placed on display where the public could examine and learn from it."

As there are few engineers in America, there are few good teachers. In my letters I had often mentioned America and her problems. I smile.

With the trembling gait of an old man, he wheels a cart from underneath his bench. Upon the cart a contraption sits, covered by a black cloth which he removes. He pulls a peg from its central shaft, then breathes upon the machine. Wooden gears turn with a creak. "This is powered by steam," he says.

The orrery is truly marvelous. At its center a sun, painted a brilliant yellow, revolves. In each orbit is a wooden ball, colored as the planet appears through the telescope. Mars is red. The Earth is white. Around every equator is written the name of the planet in a contrasting ink. I stoop to bring my eyes level with the orrery. I watch the Earth and Mars revolve about the sun. At the proper time, when viewed from over the Earth, Mars

appears to move backwards, but anyone can see this is only an apparent motion, an accident of their orbits. Since I know these facts, my eye wanders to the machinery guiding the planets. I have never seen such delicate craftsmanship worked in wood.

"The orrery shows the seven planets and their moons," says the Master, proud of his work.

Marvelous though it is, the orrery is a toy. I have corresponded with this man for months from America and from Great Britain. I have taken a perilous trip through the Parisian night. All for an orrery I could have built myself. This man is not the equal of James Watt. I rise and look down at the Master. I say, "It is magnificent, but its intricacy made visible detracts from the lesson it is supposed to teach. I, Master, am fascinated by its wires and gears and pulleys, and have only glanced at its movements of the planets and moons." At hearing my own words, I realize that in my disappointment I have failed to be diplomatic.

The Master's eyes narrow, and he fixes me with a gaze like that of a cobra as it freezes its prey. No craftsman likes to be told the success of his craft detracts from its purpose. "Can you see the engine which drives the orrery?" His speech is uttered in measured breaths, as if he had only a limited supply of air.

I admitted I could not.

"I have captured steam within it," says the Master. He falls silent for a few moments. He has made his point. I must yield. He knows this and relaxes. His breathing becomes labored and slow.

I fear he will fall unconscious and compound his injuries. I return my attention to the orrery, as does the Master. Watt's engine is made of iron. If the master can work with steam in wood, then his work, not the Englishman's, would be most fit for America. We have quantities of wood, but little iron. I say, "An accomplishment beyond any man's reckoning, Master."

The Master twists his neck so that he may look into my eyes. I shudder. He is bloody in one eye. His nose may be broken. His trembling body is crooked in its posture. He has been brutally beaten. I wonder if he participated in the murder of Labbé's policeman or, worse, tried to defend the rascal from the mob.

At last he says, "I have improved upon the sciences of the Greeks."

Greek science is antique, deserving of a museum. Modern science is built on modern methods, modern discoveries. I say, "It is the age in which we live. We are all scientists. I myself know that electricity is a fluid which flows through metals and furs and airs. That fact was unknown to the ancients."

The Master of Steam dismisses my boast with a snuffle.

I say, "It was Hero, I believe, who had a machine which showed the planetary calculus in just the way this orrery does."

"I have not ceased my researches with this orrery!"

The Master of Steam sweeps his arm like a scythe to contradict me, but stops his motion in mid-sweep. With an ashen face he says, "Forgive me, Sir, my wounds have not had time to heal." He slowly lowers his arm.

"I am in error, Master, for agitating you." I have let my disappointment displace my jovial nature. I had forgotten my mission. "I have never seen an orrery such as yours. The others grind and rattle, and their engines are clumsy and large." I wait while the pain leaves him.

"No," he says. "Your letters asked about my investigations of steam. I have boasted of my successes while showing you a trifle." Again he paces his breathing like that of a man nearly asleep. "The Greeks believed breath, 'psyche,' was the force of life," he says.

"Anaximenes did, but Aristotle did not."

"Both philosophers were wrong, but Aristotle the more so. Have you noticed how on a cold day your breath clouds the air?"

This was true: wherever a cold winter is found, clouds blow from the nostrils of men and animals.

He continues, "That cloud is a bit of your life force dying in the air. The soul's heat mixes with the cold of the world and is defeated."

"I seek an engine, Master, not metaphysics."

The Master rests his finger upon the sun of the orrery. "With this I perfected the capture of steam within wood," he says. "I breathed upon it but once, and that energy has cooled." He replaces the peg that prevents the orrery's motions. "When I first made it I breathed upon until I fainted; then I hired the children of the streets to breathe upon it while I adjusted it."

The Master leans against his workbench, gathering strength. "The steam engine was invented in France," he says, "by Monsieur Papin less than a hundred years ago."

"Mister Watt has improved the engine," I say. "But he keeps his secrets." Watt refused me a look at his machine. No number of pounds nor guarantee of an exalted life in the colonies could persuade him to tell me how he had perfected Newcomen's engine.

The Master shuffles toward the rear door of the workshop. I offer my hand to steady him. When he accepts, I feel his grip to be youthfully strong.

He says, "I will confirm my researches by showing you a powerful marriage of steam and wood and metal."

The Master's boot drags along the ground, scraping up brass filings and wood shavings. He unlocks the door to his private workshop.

"You have a limp?" I ask.

"An injury has left my leg numb," he says. "It will heal shortly."

I doubt this. As I grow older, illness comes more frequently and health is slower to return.

I follow the Master into his private workshop. It is as large as my warehouse on the docks in Philadelphia.

"That man Watt knows nothing of what a Frenchman can do"—the Master gently taps his own chest—"to improve Papin's engine." He passes by tables littered with brass cogs and wooden blocks. He guides me past saws and small smelting furnaces.

I say, "Improvements such as yours are what I have sought." His private workshop is nearly tropical in its heat. I remove my scarf and consider removing my jacket.

"Here is what you seek," he says.

We halt before a mountain draped in red cloth. His

secret machine is more than twice the height of a man. The covering cloth shimmers in the light of the flaming lamps lining the walls.

He says, "This is my newest invention. I have made it just in time." The Master turns to face me, his engine looming behind him like a sorcerer hidden by his cloak. "I have married the power of steam to the duties of the government."

"A truly American ideal, Master."

"I originally designed the device to saw logs, but the lumbermen preferred the slowness of their hand saws to the efficiency of my engine."

I ask, "They smashed it?" From my travels in England I am familiar with the misplaced hatred laborers focus on machines which could make their work easier and add to the wealth of the commonweal.

"Envy and fear know no bounds, Sir." He winces.

I nod in agreement.

Despite his agonies, the Master collects himself. "I understand headsmen are scarce in the colonies."

The Master has fixed his thoughts upon death, not unusual for an ill old man. I reply, "Not just anyone can be appointed for the job. He must not be the kind of man who comes to love his work. Many of our colonies have laws which prohibit headsmen from signing contracts of indentured servitude. Without that, only rich headsmen can immigrate from England."

The Master of Steam laughs a low, dirty growl of understanding. "Why a man with a job he enjoys and which pays well would quit his work to sail on a dirty ship for a backward land mystifies me, Sir."

"As it does most headsmen, no doubt. We have not executed many criminals since we abolished the burning or the crushing of the accused."

The Master stoops, grunting with pain as he grasps the corner of the drape and pulls it from his machine. "The steam-powered guillotine," he announces.

It is truly terrible in its aspect. The raised blade shimmers in a red glare hotter than blood. I say, "Throughout my life, I have written of redeeming criminals, not murdering them with this blade." Beneath the blade is a cushion for the condemned to lie upon while awaiting death, and chopping block and stock to restrain him.

"Here in France the people enjoy seeing just deserts meted out to the criminals. How can things be different in America? Are not people the same the world over? Do not the people complain?"

I say, "They complain rightly that men who commit heinous crimes are freed to commit crimes still more terrible, when instead of freedom their crimes should earn them long stays in prison." This is the fault of the British, whose Tory justices had never approved the building of larger prisons as the population of the colonies increased. "But America has so few truly vicious men and has uninhabited territories for the less cruel to try their hand at building."

"Would you like to lie down while I explain the machine's features?" He gestures that he wants me to lie upon its cushion.

"Not until it's my time," I say.

He smiles at his own jest. "May that day never come, Sir."

I grimace at his form of address. His ways are wedded to those of his class.

The Master releases the blade. It passes through a box midway down the frame, and as it does a solid metallic ring fills the Master's shop. The blade strikes the block, embedding itself as a carving knife would in butter. The Master opens the box that produced the ring, showing me two whetstones which run the length of either side. "As the blade passes it is automatically sharpened."

I say, "That is a trick Jefferson would be proud of." I am not looking at the whetstones. The block upon which the blade rests has many cuts; some are stained black by blood.

The Master runs his hand along a groove in the frame. "The travelway thickens here, Sir, and the blade slows imperceptibly. It would not have buried itself so deeply had a neck been in the way. And yet, to get a clean cut the stopping point of the blade must be beyond the edge of the neck." He has his head bent down as if looking upon a bloody stump, but his eyes are upon my neck.

He takes his gaze from me and gives it back to his machine. His finger traces a brass nozzle that emerges from a hole in the guillotine just above and behind the chopping block. A matching nozzle protrudes from the other side as well. "This is the advantage of steam." He slaps the cushion on which the executed man's body would have been lying. "This is a balance. When the body is removed from the guillotine, the balance knows this and works a valve. Water is kept under pressure in a vessel underneath. The steam drives it through the jets, which direct the water to clean the block and cushion. Then the blade is raised and the machine is reset."

The design is imperfect. The jets of water have not cleaned as well as he suggests: the leather of the cushion has darkened where gore has spilled upon it.

"The head falls into that basket and doors close over it. I do not believe it should be displayed for public entertainments. The look upon the criminal's face"—the Master's eyes narrow—"at the moment of death is too terrible to behold."

I agree but add, "This punishment is too severe for most crimes."

"What if the criminal could be made to serve society?" asks the Master.

"Our police do not capture criminals from the street and force them into lifelong exile," I reply.

"Yes," he says, "You have heard of Constable Labbé's men." The Constable's men—who wear no uniforms—are the king's kidnappers, paid a bounty for their work. No child on the streets is safe, even in daylight.

He says, "They provide certain advantages for me, however despicable their work."

I could not pretend to agree. Yet France is not alone among nations in committing great crimes. During my last week in London, forty thousand had attended an execution. "In America we believe a man can be redeemed. Except for the worst of criminals, even the guilty must be freed sometime."

The Master rests his hand upon his machine. "If a criminal who had blinded a child could be forced to surrender his eyes in replacement, would that be cruel? If a criminal could give life to the aged, would that be slavery?"

I admit that restitution is a desirable goal. "But if the man is dead?" To that he could have no reply.

"My guillotine does more than kill, Sir. It is a thrasher of souls." The Master hobbles to the far side of the machine, bends slowly down, then rises carrying with him a flexible tube which might have been taken from a Turkish hookah. "It captures the convicted man's steam. The steam of his soul. When the basket's lid closes a vacuum sucks his soul down into a chamber where it is kept warm until it can be drawn off through this pipe." His teeth click against the bit of the pipe as he puts it into his mouth and draws upon it.

He sighs slowly, as man does when experiencing "the little death." Even in the fiery heat of his workshop his exhalation clouds the air.

"That cloud had the taste of a child." He tears the bandage from his face. There is no wound underneath which could have stained the bandage with blood, nor a scar where one should have been. "Children, I have discovered, have an excess of vitality. I am too young to capture it all. But you, Ben, are old."

He shuffles along the machine to stand before me, carrying the tube with him. He offers me the bit. His eyes are clear and white.

I do not take it.

"I should have brought the orrery," he says. "It could have run for months on that breath." The Master guides the pipe back to his own lips and takes another draught. He exhales, and another cloud condenses despite the heat. "That was a young woman who lacked a foot."

The Master opens his coat. Underneath, his vest is unfasted. He peels away a bloody bandage. As I watch, a wound which cut from abdomen to sternum closes, scarifies, then disappears.

I almost cover my eyes. The healing power of his machine terrifies me. For a government to use this machine would be worse than the most brutal excesses of the Hessians during the Revolutionary War.

"Your hair is grey," he says. "Despite your vigor I believe your bones are weak." He thrusts the metal nipple toward my lips.

I block his thrust with my hand and step back. "Your machine is not suitable for America, Master." I see the Master for what he is: a nobleman, entrenched, patronized by the wealthy and powerful and protected by the king. His subjects he harvests like grain. It is only in the old world that the aged feed upon the lives of the young. Regicide will be the people's only option.

He shrugs, dismissing my observation.

"I must take my leave," I say.

The Master draws again on the pipe and exhales another cloud. He smiles. All the pain in his eyes and body

vanish. He is not as old as I had first thought. When he straightens up he is nearly as tall as I am. "Remain with me, Ben," he says. "Consider the future."

I nod, turn away, then thread my way past his tables and saws and half-finished devices into the public space where the bakery case holds my cloak. I pick up my cloak; underneath are the wooden toys which the Master has made for children. I think of the future, I think of my friends in court at Versailles. I think of them inhaling the people of Paris on the Master's machine. The order of the old world must not be reproduced in the new.

I throw my cloak carelessly about my shoulders, then stride to the Master's workbench.

The Master's mirror shows a dark, empty street. I flip the switch beneath his workbench. The lock snaps open with a military precision. I hear the Master suck another draught from his machine. "Ben," he calls, "bring me the wooden soldiers from their case."

I step through the doorway, but I do not shut the door. I wait. The moon appears like a firefly hovering above the clouds. The light from the Master's shop barely lights the street.

My patience succeeds: the lock snaps closed into thin air. I take my steps onto the slick paving carefully. My boots click upon the stones. I take a deep breath of cold night air. It is good to be outside on the Paris streets where only the air stinks.

A woman steps out of the doorway of clothier next to the Master's shop. Her hands clutch at my cloak. "Is he in there?" she asks.

I am not the only one searching for the Master of Steam this night. "Yes," I answer.

She whistles. Silhouetted by the moonlight, a man crosses from the alley, running toward us. The woman holds me in place. For a moment I think Labbé's policemen have come to kidnap me. But the man stops in front of me. He holds a club already stained by blood. He bids that I open my cloak. I do so. He eyes me carefully, studying my coat, my trousers. He touches my face, studying my wrinkles and my grey hair. Satisfied I am one of them, he bows his head slightly. "How?" he asks.

The woman whistles again. One body at a time a mob appears on the street, stepping out from alleyways and from shadows. A crying woman holds an empty baby's bonnet. She looks past me into the Master's shop.

I shake my head. I do not know how. The Master has not shared his secrets with me, and I do not want to know them. The people can no longer bear the burden of the Master of Steam. I say, "He is in the rear of his shop." The November winds blow, chilling me and twisting the baby bonnet like a pennant. I pull my cloak tighter about me, stepping among the sorrowing mob. As I leave I see upon the street the shadow of the man with the club as he enters the door to the Master's shop.

Perhaps I can improve upon Newcomen's engine myself. ♦

Send Random Romantic

Bill Johnson

I had my new Betsy, and my new Rhonda. I pulled the clamshell door of the Betsy shut behind me and reached for the control panel. I dialed the Send control to Random, subcategory Romantic. I used the other hand to help Rhonda onto the couch.

Rhonda was a regular customer of mine and this year she had a fresh body, the cherry poptart model. It was the latest fad off-world. She was blonde, with long legs, a small waist, and a large bust. She was eager to check the body out, and she always paid me for Premium Consort contract.

Plus tip.

My new aircar lifted with a gentle acceleration, just enough to push us back into the cushions. The aircar banked to the left, and Rhonda swayed into



Illustration by Henry Van Der Linde

my arms. I kissed her, gently. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me back, harder.

"Where are you taking me, Russ?" she asked.

"I set the Send control to Random," I said. "Romantic Random."

"And your idea of romantic is . . . ?"

"The sea. The mountains. Anywhere there's moonlight and you," I said.

"I hope it's the sea," she said. She closed her eyes and tossed her head so the hair brushed across my face. "I love the beach."

"We'll know when we get there," I said. "I like a surprise."

"Really?" she said, and smiled. She started to do things to her clothing. "I paid for a few customizations with this body. I wonder if any of them would qualify as surprises."

She had. They did. And I was.

Close the curtain.

The Betsy grounded with a faint vibration. The landing alarm beeped, softly but insistently. The clamshell door cracked open and outside air, cool and thick with the smell of crushed grass, filled the cabin.

I slipped on my clothes and nudged Rhonda. She opened her eyes sleepily; then the outside air sunk in and she sat up, wide awake.

The world was safe, all the danger wrung out of it, to protect our precious lives. Lives that went on and on and on until the boredom made me half crazy. But that thought was dangerous, and if my psych ever found out about it I'd find myself adjusted to normal range stimulus/response.

And I'd rather die.

If it was allowed.

A Random setting on any model aircar was strictly illegal. A Random control took the predictability out of my behavior model, the image of me that lived in the main Register and let the psychs predict my every move. For my own safety, I was told. And on a Betsy model, illegally upgraded in power and range, we were talking felony adjustment time if I was caught.

Women loved it.

"Surprise time," I said. I brought the door all the way open and let her go out first.

Rhonda stepped down and stopped. I waited, impatiently, for her to get out of the hatchway.

"Russ, where are we?" she asked hesitantly.

"Damned if I know. When I modify a Send control, I modify it. We're anyplace in the world that has twenty square meters for a Betsy to set down. Beyond that," I said and shrugged, "your guess is as good as mine."

I nudged her out of the way, and stepped down. Unmowed grass came up almost to my knees. Two glow-globes provided a wan illumination, not strong enough to wash out the stars directly overhead.

No mountains. No beach.

Rhonda stepped away from the Betsy and stumbled. I helped her back to her feet. She knelt down and pushed the grass away. She stiffened as if a stat-med robot had just immobilized her.

"It's a graveyard, Russ," she said softly.

I knelt next to her. My flesh was new also, a modified hardbody model. I turned up the amplification on my eyes to see better.

The tombstone was oldstyle, like a piece of a book come to life. It was slick plastic, tinted to look like pink marble. Letters, worn and faded, were incised into the surface. It was set into a base of granite, once flat and level, now tilted and half-buried.

As I touched the tombstone, I felt a rough spot, like a small ceramic tile. I pressed. Then harder. The button resisted, then gave way with a snap and a crack.

"I love you, kids. And I love your Mom. She's the most important thing in my life—"

I stumbled backwards and landed at the feet of the holograph. I looked up and saw an old man in clothes out of some historical drama. His face was drawn and pinched, his lips a slash of red across a pale face.

He looked like death.

"A testimonial boneyard," Rhonda said excitedly. She walked a few meters away, and pushed aside the grass. She reached down and I heard a loud click. A moment later another holograph, an elderly woman, leaped into existence. She began to speak, eyes focused on a paper in her hands.

"As I have never loved another human being, finding them wanting in all particulars, I leave—"

I stood and brushed myself off. The old man finished his speech and sat, heavily. A picture of a woman, older, hair white, loose around her shoulders, a shy smile on her face, stood on his desk. He looked at for a moment, lowered his head, then looked back into the camera.

"I expect to live through this operation—"

Wrong, I thought.

"—but if I don't, I have only one request. That you find a graveyard, somewhere, and bury me next to your mother. I don't know where you'll find a graveyard with the problems with the government regulations, but it's what I want. And flowers. For your mother's grave. I've paid for flowers for the next century. Daisies. She loved them," he said, and smiled. He shook his head. "I always used to tease her, tell her I didn't see the romance in the remains of the sexual organs of plants. She'd frown and stick her tongue out at me.

"God, I miss her."

He finished, and his image froze. I waited for a moment, and the image faded.

I looked at the gravesite next to him.

It was empty.

I walked away.

Rhonda ran up and down the field. Soon the graveyard rang with five, ten, a dozen and more holographs, each proclaiming a speech frozen in time for centuries.

Some were bitter, some were sweet. Some talked of love and others of hate or, worse, indifference. Dead statues of laser light, they spoke to an audience that was gone, vanished, not even remembered.

Then, one by one they finished. For a second they froze, each caught in the last instance of their memorized speech, before the image turned grainy and vanished.

"This is all strictly illegal," Rhonda said as she stood next to me. She breathed heavily with excitement. Her tongue flicked over her lips and her eyes seemed to glow in the dark.

"Strictly," I said.

"All boneyards are gone. Especially the testimonial boneyards," she said. "Who knows what illegal thoughts are captured here?"

I nodded.

"How did you *find* it, Russ? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"It's time to leave," I said.

"Now? Yes, you're right. We can't let the Proctors find us here," Rhonda said.

Once people began to live longer and longer, graveyards made them more and more uncomfortable. People weren't *supposed* to die anymore, and graveyards were reminders that accidents still happened.

The testimonial graveyards were the worst, the psychs decided. The ever-present faces of the dead, their images, were bad for mental health, in a society where people weren't supposed to die at all. And the thoughts they left behind in the holographic images, ruminations on death and life and the meaning of it all, were even more unhealthy. When the psychs took power behind the Safety Committee, graveyards were forbidden.

I put my arm around Rhonda's shoulders and led her back to my Betsy. Inside I set the Send to Return, then stunned Rhonda with my special little ring. I edited her higher-level memories to show we'd done something exciting but strictly legal. I left her emotions alone, however, to give the evening that special glow. She might be a little puzzled when she woke, but she'd be happy and I'd be safe with my secrets.

I finished and left her to sleep. I fixed myself a drink and leaned back on the couch.

Send Random Romantic was *not* supposed to take me to illegal, unregistered graveyards. Send Random Romantic was supposed to provide a little surprise, a little jolt, to make a night more memorable.

It wasn't what I planned, but it worked.

The next day I tore the Betsy apart.

The machine itself was the very latest technology, every option for safety and comfort I could afford. Even so, I started with the mechanicals, just to make sure everything was to spec. Then I worked into the flight systems, navigation, and all the rest. I didn't expect to find anything wrong, but I was methodical. I wanted every variable under control.

Last, I started on the Brain.

No one builds a Brain from scratch anymore, except for simple models in design class. Machines build the machines that build the machines that build the machines. I was good, one of the best in my school before I went into the female escort business, but all I could do was high-level software design. Layout and optimization of a Brain based on lasers and microcrystals was too difficult for a protein-based model like mine. . . .

I recognized the Brain when I found it at a salvage

yard. It was ancient, a complete antique, a unique production run that never quite took off in the marketplace. The ownership records were lost, gone for centuries.

The Brain worked to spec, of course, or it would have been destroyed. But sometimes, I remembered, it did *more* than was supposed to do. A little more fuzz in the fuzzy logic circuits than usual, if you understand what I mean. Supposed to make it even more responsive, more customized, to the owner. Some people said that if a person lived long enough, the personality of owner and car grew more and more alike as they adjusted to each other. Eventually, it got to the point where it was hard to tell them apart. Harmless, but amusing.

Like me. Which was why I bought it in the first place.

The old memories in the Brain were locked out, or wiped clean. My probes were like striking out blindly in a dark room. I couldn't tell if I was just missing the target, or if the room was bare and clean.

My Random software executed perfectly. So did the Romantic subroutines. Every test ended up just where I expected. There was no way I was going to use this software and hardware and end up in an illegal, forgotten boneyard.

Yet, I remembered a chorus of voices, and figures from the past, solid in the moonlight. . . .

I put the Betsy back together, and climbed inside.

I dialed the Send control to Random, subcategory Romantic.

An hour later I was on a remote ocean beach, complete with white-tipped surf.

Again.

A mountain peak.

Again.

A quiet Alpine lake.

I went home.

I had a job that night, a date with an Exotic woman fresh off-ship from one of the colonies. She had money, enough to pay for a Premium Consort contract. And she wanted a moonlight tour of the ruins of Old Earth.

I called and cancelled.

My monthly Workday was scheduled for tomorrow. I paid for someone else to work for me, then a substitution penalty, and finally another fine as the cancellation pushed my Anti-Social rating into the Concern zone. I found myself automatically assigned a psych meeting next week.

I didn't care.

I made myself a sandwich and drank a beer and waited for night.

I dialed the Send control to Random, subcategory Romantic. I shut the clamshell.

My Betsy automatically blanked out the window screens and the direction indicators. I pushed the manual override.

Nothing.

I sat silent for a moment, then pushed the emergency return control.

Nothing.

I was trapped, in perfect comfort, in my own Betsy.

For a moment I felt panic bubble up inside me. No matter how much I fought against it, no matter how much I rebelled in all the little ways I was allowed, I was a child of my culture, of safety, of perfect predictability.

And this damn machine was *not* following the rules. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I opened my eyes, exhaled, and tapped the control panel. I wanted another beer.

A cup of hot chocolate slid out of the refresher.

I stared at it for a moment. I checked to make sure I'd ordered a beer. I had. I was ready to order a beer again, then shrugged. Actually, hot chocolate sounded better than a beer.

"Thanks," I said out loud.

Damn fuzzy logic.

I nursed the hot chocolate and waited. I tried to count the time off, decided it wouldn't do me any good and gave it up.

Two cups later, we grounded. I opened the door and walked into the graveyard.

The sky was clear tonight. I studied the stars, then shrugged. I saw Orion, the Big Dipper, and a few other constellations I recognized. That was it, and all it told me was that I was somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere.

I shrugged. To hell with it.

I walked into the grass, and almost stumbled over the first tombstone. I felt around with my feet for the next one, and the next, and then knew the line. I moved a meter over, so I wouldn't stumble over them, and walked to the other end of the cemetery.

There, half-buried in windblown dirt with sparse grass growing out of it, was the boneyard maintenance robot. I knelt, the soil crunched under my knees, and activated the robot.

"...—odify pro—...—rigate in dry—..."

I felt around, got a grip on the machine, tucked my legs underneath me, and lifted.

I was strong, in my new hardbody, but the robot was heavy and the earth seemed to cling to him, to clutch at him. Finally, with a wet, sucking sound, the robot came free.

I set him upright and rested a moment, hands on my knees. Then I straightened and knocked the biggest chunks of dirt and grass off the robot.

I opened the maintenance panel, and shook my head. Dead insects, dirt, mold, half the optics cooked. Even with all the redundant circuits, it was barely alive. Not functional, of course, but alive. Barely.

Well, to hell with it. I didn't have anything else to do that night.

I went back to the Betsy, returned with my repair kit, and went to work.

Time passed differently in the boneyard. It could have been an hour, or ten minutes, as I worked. It was peaceful, without even the animal night sounds carefully programmed into the forest preserves. Just the gentle rush of the wind, the rustle of the high grass, the click of metal on plastic from my tools. Once, in the distance,

I heard an owl. Not the full programmed sequence of sounds (*whooo-oo, whooo-oo*) that we set up for Exotic tourists. Just a short burst, slightly off-key, and it stopped abruptly, as if the owl suddenly had something more important to do.

I finished, sealed up the machine, and slapped it back on automatic.

It stood and surveyed the boneyard. For a moment it shifted attention and analyzed me, eye lenses clicking, then turned and headed for a low shed, also half-buried in dirt and grass.

As it moved, a tombstone fell out of the machine.

I picked up the tombstone. It was a block of solid plastic, only partially marbled. No writing on the front, and it had the feel of something done hastily and shoved into the machine to put into place.

And the machine never got a chance to finish the job.

The lights on the Betsy came on. I turned slowly and stared at the aircar.

I walked across the graveyard, my feet independent of my brain. I stood next to the grave of the old man. I reached down and put the tombstone in my hands into the holder next to his.

I punched his button, and watched the display. Heard him speak to his children. Saw him look at the picture of the woman. Then I activated the other tombstone.

A woman, older, her white hair loose around her shoulders, appeared. She smiled shyly at the world, and then her image froze and faded.

I nodded.

Back inside the Betsy I shut the clamshell and settled down.

"I need a beer," I said.

The refresher hummed, longer than I expected, and opened.

Inside I found a daisy.

Now, I always kept the aircar well equipped with flowers. For what I charge for a Premium Consort contract, my customers expect more than a little romance.

Damn fuzzy logic.

I sighed, picked up the flower, opened the door, and walked back to the graves. I laid the flower carefully on the woman's grave.

I straightened. The boneyard was quiet, the only sound the soft rustle of leaves in the wind. I turned and climbed back into my Betsy.

A bottle of beer slid out of the refresher before I asked for it. A mug, so cold that steam rose from it, stood next to the beer.

At least the important things still worked.

"How long did he own you, I wonder," I said. I shrugged and settled into my seat. I reached out for the destination pad, and hesitated.

I wondered about all the others who had owned this Brain. . . .

And my hand moved.

Send Random Romantic. ♦

Taxi Hag

From the forthcoming novel, "Kalifornia"

Marc Laidlaw

A black sawed-off station wagon rattled through thinning crowds and progressively emptier streets. It was not that dawn grew near and the revelers sought their beds, nor had the celebrants wearied of their activities, for this was an occasion that came but once and most Californians were anxious to prolong the novelty of the bicentennial while it felt like something more than another reason for sales spectacles. No, there were better reasons for the growing silence and the infrequency of humans where the wagon went.

The streets grew steadily fouler; damper and darker the decay on all sides. Buildings had fallen here, but souls had lofted high.

The driver of the wagon was a thin old woman, so frail and bird-boned that she would have banged against the dashboard every second if she hadn't been strapped to her seat. Her ancient fingers, thin and tenacious as ivy creepers, clutched the steering wheel with desperate vigor; her arms, protruding from the depths of a billowing black robe, were scarcely thicker. She drove at full speed, although it seemed impossible in the cluttered streets. Sometimes she swerved to avoid black patches, unsure if they were puddles or bottom-



Illustration by David Detrick

less tams; more often she relied on ferocious speed to plow her over or through a variety of obstacles. Pieces of barbed wire, rusty rubble, broken tubes of phosphor-powdered glass, the occasional sluggard rat, such tokens could always be found in the wagon's radiator grill at the end of her wild midnight rides. Once a sister mechanic had found a human foot in the spoked hubcaps, severed just beneath the ankle. Its advanced putrefaction had been a relief to all, offering assurance that the Official Crone had not yet struck down an innocent being. Her license was in perpetual danger of being revoked. Yet for all her frenzied speed and demonic, gutter-spanning leaps, she was at heart a gentle soul who always wept at the sight of a rat tail in the wiper blades. Nothing, however, certainly no tender sentiment, could slow her down.

Which was why she of all the Daughters had been chosen for this errand.

Over the unmuffled din of the old gas engine and through the perpetual ringing in her ears, she heard the infant wailing among the sacks of grain and kibble in the wagon's bed. It sounded like a siren, a noise foreign to these sacred precincts, since police never enforced profane laws within the boundaries of the Holy City.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure the jolting ride hadn't thrown the child from its nest. The babe appeared safe, but it made her uncomfortable to leave such things to fate, especially after the trouble she'd endured to catch the little dear.

Before long, she was forced to slow the wagon. The street had narrowed until it was no better than a track for feral dogs. It was wide enough for the wagon in most places, but there had been some slippage during the day (or perhaps the Valis sect had slyly rearranged it), and rubble thicker than usual posed a hazard. She shut off the motor, dismounted, and peered into the back of the wagon, after first checking to make sure that no one was lurking about.

Ah, the healthy wailing of a baby girl. The Official Crone's old nipples ached and itched a little. Dry memories. She hadn't heard the sound in many years. The Daughters bore no children, having no contact with men—Goddess forbid!

The baby had worked her way down among the sacks, but after some exertion the crone retrieved her. She screamed vigorously, waving her tiny fists more fiercely than any tot in the old woman's memory. Cooing, she pressed the child to her breast, wishing her eyes were better, wishing (for once) that the night were not so dark. She couldn't make out more than the plainest fact of eyes, nose, and mouth. The High Priestess had promised that the girl would have orange eyes, but there was no evidence of that in this darkness. Still, this had to be the babe they sought.

The swaddling was loose; the child now kicked free of it. The Crone set her down on a sack of cereal, bent painfully to retrieve the cloth, and, when she stood up, screamed.

Somewhere nearby, fireworks had exploded. Their light danced over the ruined towers, bits of it bouncing down to these drear depths. In the fitful flashes, unmis-

takably, the Official Crone beheld a child's dangling pee . . . pee . . . penis?

Penis?

It was a male. . . .

Her heart nearly stopped beating, but her thoughts moved so quickly that they tugged her blood along out of necessity.

The child's masculinity was a disaster. It meant she had somehow stolen the wrong child. She would suffer the cosmic wrath of Mother Kali, not to mention the more painful and immediate anger of Kali's High Priestess.

But worse than this to the Official Crone was the knowledge that she had touched the . . . the male. Her fingers had very nearly brushed that, that, that, *that thing*, that terrible item of sickening masculine flesh! All this was forbidden. More than forbidden, it was disgusting, it revolted her. She had lain with men once, long before Kali called her. She'd had a husband and even male children, but that was long ages behind her now. To think that somehow a male member had risen out of nowhere and practically fallen into her lap—it filled her with horror. The Official Crone didn't know where to turn.

First, half out of her senses, she threw the soiled swaddlings over the child to spare herself the sight of his tiny pizzle in case of another fireworks flare. She didn't know whether to scrape the boy into the street and leave him there, or simply shove him back deeper into the wagon and pretend she'd never looked, leaving all hard decisions to the High Priestess. True, that would mean desecrating the temple, but at least she could hold to her story.

But if she ditched the child and came back empty-handed, she would have no excuse. The High Priestess would think her a doddering, blind old fool, and say her infirmity made her imagine a penis in place of the pristine apricot folds of the female gender. The Official Crone knew a penis when she saw one, but what if the High Priestess didn't believe her? It just wouldn't do to insist on detailed knowledge of such a blasphemous object!

That decided her. She would do no more and no less than the High Priestess had directed. If she ended up with the wrong child, so be it.

It wasn't her fault. None of it. It was an honest accident. How many infants were tossed from fire escapes at midnight on the state bicentennial?

She clambered back into the seat, trying to keep her mind off the thing that squalled behind her. Once the station wagon started moving again, the baby would slip down between the sacks; that would explain why its *it* swaddling had come undone.

She wasn't going to risk impurity by touching it again. With a fresh, impatient eye, she examined the pile of loose rocks and cement that blocked her way. She decided that ultimately nothing would carry her through better than a burst of honest speed. And if the child tumbled overboard, well . . .

Accidents will happen.

While the bicentennial was of great concern to many Californians (particularly those on the payroll), such temporal matters fell far below the notice of the Holy City's sa-

cred squatters. Festivities couldn't offer the escape from care they sought. Governors had come and gone with hardly an impact on the precinct, except when their policies had plunged it even farther into poverty. A President of the United States had inspected the region more than forty years ago and declared it a disaster area, uninhabitable, worthy of federal assistance—had there been any spare change in the Union coffers. But money there was none, and the aid never came, and eventually even the toughest of the poor found good reason to leave. Life was hard enough elsewhere. Why suffer unnecessarily?

A few, however, ventured into the urban no-man's-land and found it to their liking—spiritual cousins of the hermits who wandered into deserts to live on locusts; into arctic wastes to subsist on lichen and flavored ice; or off to the weightless asteroid colonies, where a dedicated man could simmer and suffer self-righteously while his bones slowly softened and imploded for want of gravity.

The forgotten city's new inhabitants were pioneers of decay who found in the tangled ruins of once-modern cities enough meaningful symbols to propel their souls beyond the reach of gravity. Atop slumps of slag from which NO VACANCY signs protruded, fire-eyed, speed-eating monks divined Zen prophecies whose meaningless runes they scribbled in spray-can poetry on gray, smog-eaten walls. These were the first temples and the first rites of the new visionaries.

Next, of course, came followers. Some were orthodox ruin-skulkers, professional jackals who prowled the shadows in search of the occasional senile citizen or mendicant monk so deep in satori that he couldn't be bothered to protect himself. Prides and packs of juveniles, beasts warring for territory, tore up streets that the priests had hoped to make their own. In such an atmosphere, religion could not help but flourish.

Eventually the gangs themselves were initiated into the mysteries of this new Eleusis, brought in as guardians of the fallen temples. Outside officers of the law found ever fewer reasons to enter the inner city. The defending angels kept the avenues dark and ruinous, inculcating the mood most helpful for a zealous pursuit of salvation. One could not tread these streets without acknowledging the flesh's vulnerability, the meager meaning of mere existence. Savage spiritual predators contributed to such insights. The gangs defended those who sat on girders high in broken buildings, staring at sun and moon till blindness stunned them and they fell. On occasion, the gangs were even said to roam beyond the sacred city's bounds searching for acolytes, offering a bloody baptism to those whom fate tossed into their filthy-pure hands.

None of these defenders disturbed the Official Crone's wagon, having watched it come and go night after night. She in turn accepted them, and tried not to dwell on the fact that some were men. Men did have their uses, she supposed. Life was all balance, all compromise. Only death, black mercy, was totality, a perfect bargain sealed.

At last, just ahead, she saw the black temple of her sect. Some Holy City residents made their homes in ancient condominiums, blasted supermarkets, laundromats, car parks, banks, and bowling alleys. But the Daughters

of Kali had found themselves an actual church, of uncertain denomination but clearly intended for worship. Above the entrance was a wide marquee on which the Daughters had arranged the name of their goddess in black plastic letters. COMING SOON: KALI! A small booth stood below the great sign, from which the priests of old had declaimed to passersby and plucked acolytes from among the unwary. The doors were mere metal frames, empty when the Daughters inherited the temple, although they had since filled the frames with dark, translucent scenes in stained plastic. The Crone had joined the temple several years before, when the High Priestess first opened its doors. Before that, she had served Kali in other ways, less knowingly.

She drew up in an alley alongside the church and rapped the secret code on the dark rear door. It opened creakingly, pulled back by a black-cowled Daughter who greeted the elder with a respectful curtsy.

"Get the High Priestess," the Official Crone said. "The errand is done."

"But it's nearly time for mass," the younger protested. "Tell her now, before it starts. She needs to know."

The young Daughter scurried away, leaving the Official Crone to take her post. It was closer to dawn than she had thought. Inside the temple, Daughters scurried to finish their tasks before sunrise and the night's last ceremonies.

The tattered rows of temple seats were full of worshippers. Their shadows leaped on the painted walls where bits of dirty gilt glimmered, caught in the light of a hundred votive candles that burned in alcoves around the room as well as on the wide stage at the low end of the slanting floor. High in the wall opposite the stage was a tiny, square window, the fane of the inmost mysteries, where burned the most sacred flame of all.

Suddenly that high flame snuffed out. Three Daughters hurried over the stage, extinguishing votive candles, plunging the entire sanctum into darkness.

I'm too late, thought the Official Crone.

The morning mass began.

A light brighter than any flame sprang from the shrine's high window, cleaving the dark air, casting its radiance on the screen of dingy pearl above the stage. The Daughters cupped their hands together, beginning to moan. For a moment the light was too hot to bear; they squinted, not daring to turn away. Then, mercifully, a bit of shadow obtruded, softening the glare.

Black fingers fluttered across the white field. A sinuous black arm eclipsed the screen.

Now appeared the head, shoulders, and arms of a dancing woman. Her whole body followed. Snake-like she writhed against the screen, blacker than the night sky, banishing the hated unlike glare. Once again the temple sank into blackness, but this was deeper, darker, richer than the puny shadows that had come before. This was the blackness of Kali, whose very name meant black.

The Official Crone's eyes rolled up in her skull. She sank to her knees. She was not the only one in rapture as narcotic smoke poured from the ventilation shafts and whistles wailed in the hollow heights.

"Kali!" they whispered. "Kali-ma!"
"Daughters!" cried the High Priestess, her voice falling all around them. "Daughters, the age of the sun is coming to an end. Tonight is Kali's time. The governments tumble, the nations will crumble. Tonight, even this decadent land of poppies and lotus-eaters has felt the force and cunning of Her wrath. While California sings and laughs, Her golden hair is gripped in the black fist of the Goddess!"

"Kali-Kali-Kali-ma!"

Shadows crept like inky smoke into the convolutions of the Official Crone's brain, rooting out her secrets and her sins, feeding on her shame. They poked and prodded till she knew she must vomit out her guilt. Still she held her tongue, choking down the bile of her blasphemy.

"Truly, Daughters, the long night is falling. Kali's age is upon us. We live in the center of the storm, in Kali's eye. Our mother will preserve us when she brings the black balm of total annihilation."

"Kali spare me!" the Official Crone shrieked, unable to bear any longer the raking of black claws. "I have sinned! I have touched a man!"

Silence.

At her words, even the High Priestess fell silent. The darkness felt more ordinary now, though it remained ominous. A few candles sprang to life.

The Official Crone began to tear at her hair, begging silently for mercy. Oh, how the Goddess would punish her. Now she might never die. She would live forever beneath a searing noonday sun, in a California of chrome and plastic, enduring the smiles of young men with skin of bronze.

Suddenly the High Priestess, appearing out of nowhere, clutched her shoulder and dragged her to her feet.

"How have you sinned, old woman? Did you fail in your mission? Why didn't you come to me directly? How did you fail? When did you get back? What man distracted you? Can't we trust you on your own, or are you determined to disgrace this temple with your vile hag-lust?"

"Please, please," the Official Crone gasped. "In the wagon, it was there I touched. Forgive me, Priestess."

The High Priestess shoved her through the door, into the alley. "Stop your wailing. The pain you feel is nothing compared to what will come as your punishment."

The wagon sat silent in the alley. The child made no sound. Perhaps he had bounced out after all. Would that make the High Priestess any more merciful? Allow the Official Crone to doubt it.

"A man, you said. Where?"

The Crone pointed with a trembling finger. The High Priestess and two Daughters advanced to the wagon, while others—fierce guardians—held the elderly woman erect. The High Priestess began to sort through the sacks. Finally she found what she sought, and let out a bitter laugh.

"A man, you said?"

"A male, Priestess! I meant a male! I did as you asked, everything went perfectly, the other wagon was delayed, the child fell from the sky—but still, still, this is what came to us. I didn't mean to look, but how could I avoid . . . it?"

A commotion spread through the Daughters. Some cast their eyes fearfully to the sky, but thankfully there was no flush of dawn between the corroded towers.

"Not a man," said the High Priestess, chuckling. "Not even a male, dear old Crone, though I see how you made such a mistake with your bad eyes."

"A mistake?" the Official Crone said hopefully.

The babe began to bawl. The High Priestess tore away the swaddling and raised the child aloft. In the pale light falling from inside the temple, the Official Crone saw once again the thing that had terrified her in the streets.

But now, in steadier illumination, she saw where she had made her mistake.

The child possessed female genitalia, a hairless cleft, a tiny mound. All this and something more: not a penis, but very like one.

"Do you see, old woman?" The High Priestess shook the baby. "Do you see what you mistook for masculinity? It's nothing to be afraid of. In fact, it's a triumph. This is the child I sent you for; no other comes so specially equipped."

The Official Crone could scarcely take her eyes off the tiny wisp of . . . well, not flesh exactly. It looked more like plastic cable, shiny and clean, ending not in an irrational foreskin-covered glans, but in a reasonable metal tip. A simple prong.

The High Priestess's laughter echoed from the buildings. Far away, one could hear an unwitting answer in the revels of San Francisco.

The Official Crone let out a sigh and sank to the street.

"Yes, old woman, you have served Kali well." The High Priestess signaled to the other Daughters. "Let her have the reward Kali promised. The Black Needle—Kali's blessing."

The Official Crone let out a cry of relief and delight. The Daughters crowded around, excitedly proclaiming, "Isn't it wonderful? Kali's blessing! Tonight you die!"

"Oh!" she cried. "Thank the Goddess!"

"Have a nice death," the High Priestess bid her. "You will deserve it."

While others took the Official Crone to her reward, the High Priestess remained behind. She held the child close to her cheek, inhaling the sharp scents of night that clung to the warm, damp flesh. She smelled sulfur, gunpowder, the brassy taint of human fear. Not the child's fear, no, but the fear of others who had touched her during the night.

Her own mother must have feared her.

The High Priestess gazed at the night sky, a black maelstrom of smoke.

"Kali is your mother now," she whispered.

The babe gave a startled cry.

"Yes, Daughter, we are all her children. But for you she has reserved something special, something quite unique."

The child quieted, staring at the High Priestess with deep golden eyes. The girl was more beautiful than she had imagined. Her eyes glowed like the sun. But this sun would bring an end to the other.

"In honor of this night, we have a special name for you. Henceforth, you shall be known as Kalifornia." ♦

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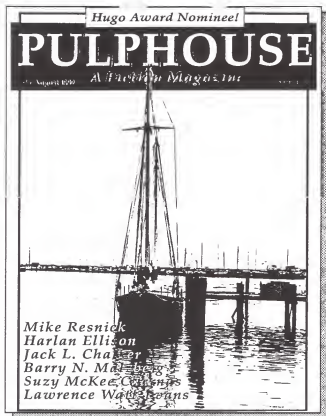
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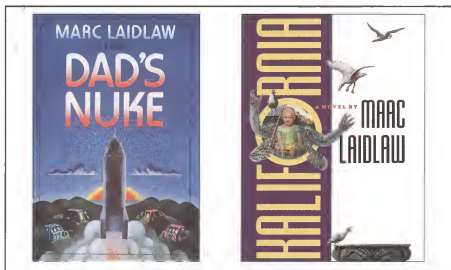
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Laidlaw Rising

George Zebrowski

I have been reading Marc Laidlaw's fiction since his first story was published in the late '70s, and it was my editorial good fortune to have included two of his stories in my *Synergy* series of original anthologies from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. These stories and others, as well as Laidlaw's first two novels, *Dad's Nuke* and *Neon Lotus*, exhibit pace, outrageous original ideas reminiscent of Philip K. Dick, and a lucid verbal inventiveness that still makes me smile, gasp, and admire on nearly every page.

"The Farmer on the Wall," in *Synergy 4*, is especially noteworthy, and typical of the ability of this native Californian (descended from Basque and Scottish immigrants) to take an old idea and make it new. There have been many stories, novels, and films in SF's history about people shrinking or growing, sometimes into an infinity of upper or lower universe levels, as well as stories about small and big people getting into all kinds of mischief. *The Girl In the Golden Atom* by Ray Cummings (1923) and "He Who Shrank" by Henry Hasse (1936), with their now quaint use of the Rutherford-Bohr concept of the atom as a tiny solar system, are only two of the better-known examples. Laidlaw's use of this concept of scale develops the idea into new dramatic possibilities, giving us a picture of a human society that matter-of-factly accepts life coexisting on different scales, with communities of tiny people living on



the walls of a larger person's home. "The scale laws had to be enforced," I wrote about the story in *Synergy*, "regardless of the physical or social size of the offender."

Now St. Martin's Press, in the person of its discerning editor, Gordon Van Gelder, has published Laidlaw's much delayed third novel. His first two seemed to have both nonplussed and bewildered his publishers, perhaps because the author chose not to repeat himself, and may have run afoul of the false problems often cited by sales departments: We don't know how to sell a writer who isn't a known quantity. And don't ask us how to create *new* known quantities, because we don't know how to do that. Besides, we're not the problem—it's the distribution system.

Of course, when a book is a big

financial success the publisher takes much of the credit, and the author gets blamed for a financial failure. Few outsiders know what is "charged" against a book's life these days. The comparison may be made with Hollywood's accounting procedures, where a percentage of net profits is meaningless, because the studio is not prevented by law from charging whatever it deems necessary against the cost of making the film. This often means that everyone gets paid but the film, technically speaking, never makes a profit. The only way out of the problem is to have a film contract that grants one a percentage share of the gross earnings. There was a time when a book's earning out the author's advance meant that the publisher had also regained his production expenses, but no more—

that proportionality is gone, and has even become a subject of humor.

Marc Laidlaw belongs to a group of newer writers who are equally at home in science fiction, fantasy, and general literature, again reminding us that SF, although it has been treated as a genre, has always been much more than that. He is just as likely to cite George Gissing and Jane Austen as he is to refer to Philip K. Dick, Thomas McGuane, or James Thurber when discussing his own work, without an ounce of pretension or shame. American SF developed in a magazine ghetto, much as jazz developed through a necessary creative insularity, even though publishing throughout this century has often presented SF and fantasy without the label. SF's non-genre characteristics—its capacity to present the reader with an imaginary but realistically portrayed vantage point in future time—implies some critical view of the present, even when buried in an adventure story. SF's methods of extrapolating the human impact of believable changes, of exploring alternative possible futures, reinterpreting the past in imaginative ways, and giving, in even the worst space opera, some sense of the universe in which our earth swims, have always suggested the critical possibilities not of a genre or form, but of an artful, wide-ranging way of assessing and exploring human possibilities, through a fiction that is not afraid of presenting both knowledge and thought. SF also has a long tradition of humor, satire, and irony, applied to culture and politics, beginning with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, onward through H. G. Wells, and well into the modern period.

It has been argued that a genuine SF dealing with the human impact of changes in science and technology, truly interpreting developments and putting forward moral, intellectual, and historical visions of possible futures, might be the very center of literature, in which the centrality of our love-hate, critical, creative, often naive and chaotic relationship with science and technology would not be a mere excuse for action-adventure entertainments, but a literature of wit, high purpose, and knowl-

edgeable criticism, capable of revitalizing our fictional forms.

We have seen the effects of more than one genre on contemporary literature over the last two decades; we live, in fact, in a world that was imagined in hundreds of SF stories and novels. To insist, as the best SF does, that reality is not what we often accept in our daily lives, that the future might be very different from the past, and that perhaps we can shape our own futures, may seem only a brave wish to some; but the best SF continues to insist that we think about what futures we are making. Arthur C. Clarke, Carol Emshwiller, Allen Ginsberg, and many others have come to the realization that "It's all science fiction now."

This implicit seriousness of a literature that came into being with the industrial revolution is usually overlooked, with much SF still presented as part of popular culture's entertainment mill. It is mostly denied the critical and literary forms of publication granted to even the most modest contemporary novel about marital infidelity. SF departments at prestigious publishing firms have been tolerated rather than developed. Many fiction editors still look down on SF, even though sometimes they permit writers like John Updike or Margaret Atwood to deal with SF themes, or even co-opt an Ursula K. Le Guin or Stanislaw Lem into the fold, if only to use them to reproach the rest of the field. Although SF has had its movements, it still remains for the genre to take on the continuing bigotries of the literary establishment which, I suspect, envies SF its vocal audience, and continues to see SF as a fantastic extravagance intruding into the "real world."

It was possible by the late '70s to believe that the battle for quality SF had been won. Ursula K. Le Guin had published *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. R. A. Lafferty, Michael Bishop, Gregory Benford, Harlan Ellison, Jack Dann, Howard Waldrop, and many others had published books that can hold their own with any in American fiction—and they had received serious packaging designed to survive in libraries and private collections. But no one had

counted on *Star Wars* rekindling the public's romance with old-time pulp magazine space operas. SF became big business; and with big money came an increase in the censorship of the marketplace. At the same time the writer-editors who had created SF as a publishing entity lost their influence to younger editors, hired by publishers who knew little about the field, setting back nearly a half-century of development. Being a reader of SF does not make one an authority on the field, or an editor, though one may learn to function in such a position as an acquirer of books. The simple fact is that ignorance of the field's history directly affects an editor's decisions about what he will accept, and determines how he will present an author to readers. This creates inauthentic packages which needlessly diminish reader interest at the crucial moment of purchase, regardless of the quality of a work. The book is not what the packaging pretends.

The marketplace now in effect censors the SF writer by the simple acceptance or rejection of certain kinds of work, by telling him or her whether it is thought likely that a proposed work will sell, or be acceptable to the chain stores, regardless of the work's quality or significance. The development of new talents is slowed or prevented. Older, accomplished writers are often simply discarded. Good, bad, or indifferent work survives solely by the series of accidents called sales. Publishers simply won't admit that they don't have the resources, or are unwilling to use those they have, to adequately present all the books they acquire; they take on more than they can do well by. I can't imagine a better description of contractual bad faith toward the individual writer, when in fact SF in the aggregate is a big, profitable business that might easily support quality work and do a better job of putting books of all kinds into the hands of readers.

Happily, like all censorships, this regime still fails occasionally, and we are given perhaps a half-dozen ambitious works every year, albeit at a terrible price: the writer is rarely given a chance to do it again after

one book gets through; hence many writers are denied a stable development of their abilities, and must flee from publisher to publisher, and from editor to editor, or must try to follow an itinerant editor whom they respect. The exceptions are those writers who can turn out a book every six to eight months or so, so that the publisher can establish their "shelf presence," defined as "we have to get a lot of books by you out at the same time, so you will take up a lot of space in the racks and get your name recognition." Even an established author repeatedly finds himself in the predicament of the ancient Hebrews, when there came to Egypt a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.

Worst of all these days is the nearly complete failure of many SF editors to understand or to be able to nurture the creative process. They do things for their own benefit and convenience, often from overwork and having to handle too many books, rather than to help the author, much in the manner of a bus driver I once knew who seemed affronted by the fact that he had to stop and let on passengers because doing so interfered with his schedule and might get him fired. These editors rarely see that an inadequate draft can in time crystallize into a fully formed work. This inability to "see" into a work in progress is an editorial failure that strangles literary children in the cradle. Yet all good work is a miracle performed not routinely, as publishing schedules would wish, but on the edge of a cliff in a thunderstorm during an earthquake. A publisher's lack of patience, understanding, and support of gifted authors only ensures the self-fulfilling expectation of failure. Even writers who are affluent enough to be able to submit finished work cannot expect that quality will prevail over commercial preconceptions.

Second, third, even fourth novels are especially vulnerable to commercial pressures. Their authors are demoralized by the babblings of editors who will never know "how it happens," and who will never see that the seeming hopelessness of creative work can often be quite normal,

even necessary. There should be a book titled *Famous Bad Drafts of Great Books*, but it would probably never be published.

Books are a writer's children. Imagine having to write your child's DNA, word by word, rather than having the process be automatic, as it is in biology. A book is also an expression, partly unconscious, of an author's character. A book doesn't care about the author; it is an entity trying to get itself written, and it has needs to be fulfilled. Rejected at first by its author or publishers, it may continue to improve, wearing away at the author until he works at it again. The terrible irony, and often the agony of a writer, is that a delayed, rejected, neglected novel may continue to progress while the writer suffers. One might almost believe that this is the best of all possible worlds, which can have so much progress in it, either way, and regardless of the suffering involved.

The genuine authorities in the SF field, who might make the intrinsic problems of creativity more tolerable, are well known to those writers and editors in the field who know some history, but they are invisible to *publishers*, who only lose money by their ignorance of SF's past, little realizing that there is an effective way of presenting SF to readers, a way that grows out of a knowledge of a particular author's place in SF, and his or her accomplishments, which *must* find genuine expression in the way in which a book is presented to readers—as a genuine artifact. This means not following the fashions of cover art and design, upholding standards of typesetting and paper quality, and writing jacket copy that doesn't insult the reader or embarrass the writer. Many have been the times I've listened to readers in bookstores complaining about 1) a book's type size, 2) the fact that the pages would yellow in a month, and 3) bemoaning the sameness of the cover art and the silliness of the hype—and have watched them not buy the overpriced book, preferring a used or borrowed copy instead. I have also watched these same readers buy an expensive, well-produced book from Phantasia Press, or spend

a hundred dollars for an "authentic" Arthur C. Clarke first edition from Gnome Press, because "it looks the way a book by that author should."

Only devoted editors, backed by publishers who know an expert when they see one, can even hope to get a book over the hurdles set by its audience. SF is sold short by its publishers, and, sadly, by realistic, talented but cynical writers who give them what they want, because they've grown tired of fighting for quality. An intelligent writer is always in the position of the Greek philosopher who was accosted on the street and asked, "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" And many writers say to themselves, "I am smart, and I can give the money people and sales force exactly what they want."

And many do. Some even use the money to write a good book once in a while; others keep promising the good book "next year." Many fall silent. Some write for the desk drawer. National treasures such as R. A. Lafferty are being lost, as publishing grows ruder and more inhumane than it has ever been, increasingly resembling Hollywood's treatment of talent—broken promises, bad faith, inept royalty statements, surreptitious contractual pressures, and blunders that are swept under the rug rather than redressed. There are several Philip K. Dicks walking around today, who will be recognized too late to do them much good; and those responsible think themselves immune to public shame, little suspecting that records are being kept, and events are being written down. A vast history is waiting to be opened in future memoirs and biographies, in which names will be named and wrongs exposed.

Publishing is about to undergo radical changes in the next two decades, exposing editorial and publishing malpractice as a clearly defined failure that is the rule rather than the exception. The electronic book promises the writer a more direct access to his audience, and holds out the possibility that, through changes in economies of scale, a book need never go out of print, regardless of how many copies it sells. Intrinsic

merit may again become the guiding quality of what is published.

So it is that, against the present background of bean-counting that diminishes both the quality and quantity of beans and even interferes with and prevents their production, the publication of *Kalifornia* is a cause for celebration. A work of art has gone up the hill and across the barbed wires—and maybe, just maybe, one or two others can slip through in the same place. Here is a book that not only stands comparison to James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter*, *This Is the Way the World Ends*, and the tantalizing, forthcoming *Towing Jehovah*, and also to George Turner's *Brain Child* and Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide*, but which can also be likened to Frederik Pohl's and C. M. Kornbluth's classic *The Space Merchants*, James Gunn's *The Dreamers*, and for its verve to Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*. Other comparisons that come to mind are Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo*, Gore Vidal's *Messiah*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*.

In a symposium on first novels published in the Fall 1990 *SFWA Bulletin*, Marc Laidlaw stated that it was his ambition in *Dad's Nuke* to write an SF novel set completely in suburbia—"a cross between *The Space Merchants* and *The Brady Bunch* . . . *Ordinary People* in the future . . . to unite pro- and antinuclear forces in laughter." The novel's "freestyle" method of composition brought together literary and extraliterary techniques and influences as they came to hand during writing, to tell the story of Dad Johnson and his programmed family's escalating neighborhood conflicts, partly the result of the family's culturally sanctioned individualism and isolationism, one example of which finds the family trapped in cyberspace during a computer-simulated vacation to Yosemite.

Neon Lotus, Laidlaw's second novel, a Philip K. Dick Award finalist, gives us a search for ancient computer memories in Tibet, a girl-goddess and high-tech nomads, rebel lamas, Tantric truck drivers and wild experiments, as well as the liberation of Tibet from the Chinese,

and well illustrates Laidlaw's advice to new writers: "Let's tear out the throats of these suicidal publishing dinosaurs—let's give them no mercy but assault them flank, face, and hindparts with originality, bizarrely real characters, and nonstandard plots, until they give in and start publishing our stuff . . . or else sink into tar, while we leap off lightly and pad over into Hollywood, fangs bared."

As a brilliant, storming satire on the future of popular media and Hollywood culture, *Kalifornia* fulfills Laidlaw's own advice. I wouldn't be surprised if this book were optioned for a movie; if produced, it might even be one of those self-mocking films that Hollywood makes once in a while, congratulating itself for the effort, just to show everyone that the movie industry can be self-critical and artistic. The novel is by turns bitterly funny, inventively clever and humane, filled with a wealth of sly references to high and low culture that cannot be exhausted in one reading. This comic inferno of a novel continuously confronts the reader with jaw-dropping moments of astonishing beauty as we follow the birth and kidnapping of an awesome child, named *Kalifornia* (the first child to be born as part of a live "wire" show, a form of entertainment linked directly to one's nervous system), as she is sought by her mother and by factions of a 21st century entertainment industry, and by politicians who seek to use her and the advanced technologies of public "wire" entertainment to gain control of the United States. It seems impossible that Laidlaw can sustain the dazzling pace of his Hitchcockian story with any kind of meaningful insight into his characters and themes, but he does so right up to the last breathless moments.

This is thoughtful, socially extrapolative SF with a vengeance, provocative and entertaining, but also courageous in facing us with important themes and questions. What kinds of culs-de-sac wait for us in new technologies? Will we get in over our heads as we use new technologies to deliver mindless entertainments? I had the uneasy feeling

while reading this novel that "catered fiction," in which the writer serves up only what he thinks the reader has ordered, is itself a step toward the "wires," as is much pop entertainment. Laidlaw never lets us forget that the difference between audience masturbation and genuine works is the presence of critical thinking.

But, one might say, there have been many novels of ideas in the past, many of them full of sound thinking, careful insights, and high ambitions. Too often they have not been outstanding as novels, whatever their importance. They lacked the elegance, the language, the grasp of their subject that might have made them into well-formed wholes. This is not the case with *Kalifornia*. Laidlaw composes his prose, and his novel burgeons with verbal music and motion, at once jazz and rock, classically lyrical, dancelike and poetic, with deep, intensely visual rhythms that keep time with the storytelling and ideas—all of this presented with such cunning, seamless craft that we forget the distinctions that shatter the attempted wholes of lesser wordsmiths. I searched for a passage from *Kalifornia* to quote at this point, and found it impossible to set a context for the one I found that would not make clumsy what was elegant. The novel's shining obsidian beauty should not be broken.

Laidlaw's cynical, hard future is courageously imagined, and the drama of his final scene, as the struggle for *Kalifornia*'s soul is resolved, earns the power to move us. This is a novel of glaring, urgently lurid beauty, drawing us into the aesthetics of technology, wringing compassion from us as it traverses the flypaper of media and popular culture in which we have become stuck. As cautionary SF, it warns us of dreams and fantasies replacing reality, and does so in a fiction that has the power of a gripping, unforgettable nightmare constantly threatening to become real, from which it may already be too late to wake. This is science fiction written fully awake and with eyes wide open. ♦

Thallasogens I: The Ammonia Ocean

Stephen L. Gillett

From the observations on our own Solar System, we now have a better idea of how planets work: what they're made of, the processes that shape their interiors and surfaces, even something about how they formed and evolved. But for SF, of course, the known is merely a point of departure: how different can things be? After all, worldbuilding is one of the glories of science fiction!

Well, life-bearing planets probably require a liquid, because life needs a solvent that all its multitude of chemical reactions can take place in. So what might form oceans, or maybe just lakes, or maybe even just dew: what are possible thallasogens? ("Thallasogen," from the Greek for "sea former," is a mellifluous coinage of Isaac Asimov's.)

Obviously water is a dandy thallasogen: here we are! But before we get into whether there might be any stand-ins for water, let's see why it works so well.

It's made of common elements—hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen, of course, makes up most of the universe. Oxygen is quite a bit rarer than that, but it's still a very common heavy element. In the Solar System, for example, only helium is more abundant. Oxygen is so abundant because its most common isotope, O-16, is exceptionally stable, so it gets made abundantly by the nuclear processes that build up elements in stars.

This quirk of nuclear physics makes water one of the most abun-

dant substances in the Universe. The "rock" making up the satellites in the outer Solar System, for example, is mostly just ice. Satellites such as Uranus's moon Miranda are largely overgrown icebergs.

Water has unusual properties, too. Not only does it have a high boiling point, but it also has a very long temperature range over which it's liquid. This is convenient because planets vary in temperature from place to place—you don't want your ocean to boil at the equator, even if it *does* freeze at the poles!

Both the long liquid range and high boiling point come from "hydrogen bonding"—a hydrogen on one water molecule is attracted to the oxygen on another. The attraction is mostly just electrostatic: the oxygen atom has a slight negative charge, while the hydrogens are slightly positive. This bonding links up water molecules so that breaking up the liquid is extra difficult.

Water also is a near-universal solvent. It dissolves virtually anything, at least to some degree. This is because it's a highly *polar* molecule—the electric charge in the molecule is not evenly distributed. The two hydrogens are not in a line with the oxygen atoms, but are off to one side, with the angle between them about 120 degrees. This makes the side of the molecule with the hydrogens distinctly more positive, while the side away from them is distinctly more negative.

This uneven electric charge makes

it easy for water molecules toglom onto ions (atoms or molecules that have an electric charge because they've lost or gained electrons). It also makes it easy for water to dissolve most salts—at least ionic salts. For example, ordinary salt—sodium chloride, NaCl—consists of an array of Na^+ and Cl^- ions stacked in a regular cubic arrangement. When salt dissolves in water, the water molecules worm their way between those ions and thus break up the crystal.

Water also easily mixes with other polar liquids, such as alcohols—and also ammonia, of which more anon. In fact, about the only things that aren't very soluble in water are *non-polar* molecules, such as oils. These have an even distribution of electric charge all around the molecule, so there's no "leverage" for the water molecule to latch onto.

Such a universal solvent is just what you need for a biochemical solvent. Not only can it expedite biochemical reactions by making it easy to move things around—food and oxygen in, waste products out—but it provides a medium in which chemical regulators such as enzymes, hormones, and even nucleotides, the building blocks of RNA and DNA, can move around.

Water, by the way, also has a profound influence on rocks: it's a highly corrosive substance. Weathering on our soggy planet breaks up minerals and forms new ones with astonishing thoroughness. To a geologist, for example, the most striking

thing about the rocks the Apollo missions brought back from the Moon is their complete absence of water alteration. The lavas are very fresh, their minerals absolutely clear and pristine: the crystals aren't encrusted with masses of tiny "secondary" minerals formed by reaction with water, as is ubiquitous in Earth rocks. Water even dissolves to some extent in molten rocks, which has profound consequences for Earthly volcanism. And, as I described in a previous article (February 1992), the smidgen of water in Earth's mantle probably allows plate tectonics—the (so far as we know) unique process by which our planet reworks its surface.

Last, water expands when it freezes into ice. This is extremely unusual; most liquids are less dense than the solids they melt from. (And under very high pressures, water too is "normal": high-pressure forms of ice are denser than liquid water.) Only "Ice I"—ordinary, low-pressure ice, the kind you find in your freezer—is less dense than the liquid.

This quirk is important in Earth's climate regulation. In the winter, the skin of ice that forms on oceans, lakes, and other bodies of water keeps the water from freezing clear through. By insulating the water underneath, it makes it a "heat reservoir," because that unfrozen water can never get colder than freezing. (It also lets critters needing liquid water, such as fish, survive even when the air temperature drops below freezing.)

This is quite a range of properties to duplicate! But is there anything else that might work?

Maybe. One substance in particular is a lot like water: liquid ammonia. It's a classic alternative life-liquid, both in scientific speculation and in SF. Poul Anderson's world *T'Kela in Trader to the Stars* is one example, and Bob Forward's *Flight of the Dragonfly* (newly republished as *Rocheworld*) is another.

How is ammonia like water? First, it's also made from common elements: nitrogen and hydrogen, and so it's also common in the Universe. (Ammonia has the chemical formula NH_3 .)

Second, the properties of ammonia are somewhat similar to water.

It's a good solvent, for one thing. Although ammonia doesn't dissolve ionic salts as well as water, because it's less polar, it dissolves many organic compounds even better than water does. In fact, there's a whole technical literature on chemical reactions that take place in ammonia solution rather than water solution. This isn't just academic, either; quite a number of ammonia-solvent reactions are important in industry.

And third, ammonia is also hydrogen-bonded. Thus, it's also liquid through a fairly long temperature range, over 40° centigrade, and it also has a relatively high boiling point. At one atmosphere pressure, NH_3 freezes at 77.7°C and boils at -33.4°C. (Or, for those of you still thinking in feet 'n' Fahrenheit, the freezing point is -107.9°F and boiling point -28.1°F.) Whichever temperature scale you use, of course, an ammonia-ocean planet will be *cold*!

To be sure, since its liquid range is smaller than water's, ammonia won't be as flexible a thalassogen as is water. But, as we'll see later, a real ammonia ocean will have a longer liquid range than does pure NH_3 , because other things—water, mainly—will be dissolved in it.

On the other hand, ammonia has problems as a potential thalassogen. One standard show-stopper, for example, is that ammonia ice sinks in liquid ammonia. The fact that ice floats on liquid water probably helps stabilize Earth's climate. This won't happen in an ammonia sea.

However: if water ice sank, a layer of ice at the bottom of bodies of water might stabilize climate, too. It makes it hard to boil the ocean, for one thing, since you have to melt all that ice first. So maybe ammonia ice's sinking is not a show-stopper after all. It makes the climate regulation different, but not impossible.

But from what we now know about planets, there's at least one other severe problem: photodissociation by solar ultraviolet light. In this process, energetic ultraviolet light breaks up molecules at the edge of the atmosphere; and if the molecule contained hydrogen, the hydrogen is lost to space. Earth loses a little water in this way all the time from the

edge of its atmosphere. The H_2O is broken up, and the hydrogen leaves.

Earth's loss rate is low because most water freezes out as ice in the cold upper atmosphere before it gets high enough to be destroyed—the so-called "cold trap." But Venus, over geologic time, probably lost most of her water in this way, because her atmosphere was always too warm for the water to freeze out (see my column in March 1992).

Now, ammonia is even more easily broken up by UV than is water, and of course it freezes at a much lower temperature. So an ammonia planet's going to need a very effective cold trap indeed. In fact, we have an example of the problem in our own Solar System: Saturn's huge moon Titan. It has an atmosphere thicker than Earth's that consists largely of nitrogen. That nitrogen may have come from ammonia photodissociation, back early in Solar System history.

A red, type M star would help preserve the ammonia in the atmosphere: red stars put out a lot less ultraviolet light than do yellow, type G stars like the Sun. So now we can say that an ammonia-ocean world is not only cold, but has a red sun. Such stars are cooler, too, which makes it easier to arrange a cold world.

And there's another advantage to red suns: many red dwarfs are flare stars; they brighten suddenly with vast explosions—"flares"—on their surfaces. Our own Sun has flares too; as you probably know, solar flares are a hazard for manned space flight. But on a type G star a flare doesn't affect the brightness noticeably.

Not so on a flare star. The star is so dim to start with that the flare can even double or triple the star's brightness, at least for a brief time. A reservoir of ammonia ice (or rather, ammonia-water ice as I discuss below) could provide the climatic refrigeration a planet would need to survive such outbursts. (Poul Anderson touched on this in his story.)

Another problem with ammonia oceans might be a greenhouse effect, the trapping of solar heat by an atmosphere, like a blanket. You need *some* greenhouse effect, to keep the oceans from freezing completely,

but it might be easy to get too much of a good thing. Ammonia's a good greenhouse gas, and it could cause what's called a runaway greenhouse.

A runaway greenhouse with water, rather than ammonia, probably happened on Venus early in Solar System history to set up its present hellish conditions. (I described this in the article of March 1992.) But exactly the same sort of thing could happen with ammonia—and there's less margin for error since ammonia has a smaller temperature range over which it's liquid.

Greenhouse runaway happens like so: if you have liquid ammonia on the surface, there will be a certain amount of ammonia gas in the atmosphere over it, simply through evaporation. The concentration of this vapor also depends on the temperature; the hotter it is, the more evaporation, and the higher the concentration. But: ammonia is a good greenhouse gas. So if temperatures rise, more ammonia evaporates, the greenhouse effect gets more efficient, so that temperatures rise yet more, so that *more* ammonia evaporates and heightens the greenhouse effect. . . . At some point this positive feedback will not damp out. Temperatures soar and the oceans boil. That's the runaway greenhouse.

So now we have a *thin*, cold atmosphere on a small planet circling a dim red star. Maybe if the atmosphere's thin enough, the greenhouse can't run away.

The oceans won't even be all ammonia, either. Remember that water is also a common substance in the Universe, and a world cold enough to trap ammonia will also trap *lots* of ice—ordinary water ice. So our cold ammonia-world will also consist of lots of water ice.

Ammonia and water mix together easily—as you might expect. They can hydrogen-bond to each other as easily as to themselves. For this reason, ammonia gas is highly soluble in water at room temperature: "household ammonia" solution is a dilute example. And conversely, at low temperatures quite a bit of water ice will dissolve in liquid ammonia. In fact, a little dissolved ice depresses ammonia's freezing point quite a

bit—liquid ammonia and water have a "eutectic mixture," consisting of about 80% NH_3 , that freezes only around -105°C . Ammonia and water also make "mixed" ices, which are definite chemical compounds in which water and ammonia occur in a specific ratio.

So, our ammonia ocean is actually an ammonia-water ocean. It contains dissolved ice which acts a lot like antifreeze. Hal Clement touched on ammonia-water mixtures in his novel *Star Light*, as did Forward in *Roche-world*. And, for a real life example in our own System: Saturn's huge satellite Titan may have a layer of liquid ammonia-water eutectic mixture, hundreds of miles thick, far below its solid surface.

And at this point we can see that even if you could arrange an ammonia (or ammonia-water) ocean, technology's going to be a problem.

Consider: with all that ice around, it will be hard to find *other* rocks—rocks for metal ores, or even just for building stone. Look again at those outer satellites in our own System, for example. Virtually all the "real" rock is buried under hundreds of miles of ice.

And even if you find some rock, getting metals out of ores will be extremely difficult. For one thing, there will be no fire! The atmosphere won't be reactive enough. To see why, let's compare this with oxygen and water on our own world. On Earth, oxygen is split out of water by photosynthesis and accumulates in the atmosphere. So, presumably photosynthesis by ammonia-solvent life will split out nitrogen instead. But nitrogen, unlike oxygen, is almost inert chemically. Hydrogen and nitrogen *don't* burn to form ammonia the way hydrogen and oxygen burn to form water. They take a lot more coaxing than that to combine—and even then the atoms tend to come apart ("dissociate") again.

In fact, during World War I the Germans devised an expensive industrial process to make ammonia directly from hydrogen and nitrogen. The gases are forced together at high pressure and temperature, under which conditions some atoms reluctantly combine. That's in stark

contrast to the way hydrogen and oxygen react to form water! (Then why did the Germans bother, especially in wartime? Because nitrogen compounds are extensively used in explosives, and Germany was cut off from nitrate imports by the British blockade.)

And last, even if you can get metals out of rock, an ammonia-ice solution is highly corrosive toward many metals. When ice dissolves in ammonia, you get some ammonium ion (NH_4^+). Ammonium in ammonia is an acid: it dissolves many metals to give hydrogen. (When liquid ammonia is used industrially for reactions, it's carefully freed of all dissolved water, because usually the water leads to unwanted side reactions.)

Iron, for example, reacts with many ammonium salts. Hydrogen bubbles away while the iron dissolves. Now, to be sure, most metals don't bubble up into hydrogen right away. Though the ammonia solution will be corrosive, it generally won't react all that quickly. After all, water—especially with oxygen around—is pretty corrosive too! But even though iron rusts, it doesn't react so quickly that it's not useful on Earth. And similarly, iron (or copper, or brass) tools should last long enough to be useful in an ammonia environment.

But still, the corrosiveness of natural ammonia solutions isn't always taken into account by SF writers. And with the scarcity of any metal-bearing ores to begin with, it's unlikely an intelligent species on an ammonia world could develop any significant metal working.

So fire and metal, the beginner's blocks of technology, are stillborn.

A cold world circling a red sun, trapped in a permanent Stone Age[!] by the vagaries of the local chemistry . . . I would bet it exists somewhere in this Universe of ours!

But might there be other possible thalassogens besides ammonia? I'll discuss another—sulfur dioxide, which has *never* been used in SF, to my knowledge—next month.

I would like to dedicate this article and the one next month to the memory of Isaac Asimov, who helped inspire me—as he did so many others—with a love of science and its wonders.

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Tomorrow's Books

January 1993 Releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Joan Aiken: *The Haunting of Lamb House* St. Martin's, Historical Fiction, hc, 208 pp, \$17.95. A ghostly re-imagining of the real house that inspired Henry James to write *The Turn of the Screw*.

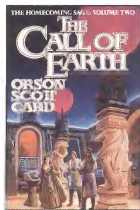
Poul Anderson: *The Devil's Game* Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. The seven people on an isolated island share only one thing—a desperate need of money which drives them to risk everything to play a deadly game.

Poul Anderson: *Flandry* Baen SF, pb orig, 400 pp, \$4.99. In the twilight of the Terran Empire, Dominic Flandry stands ready to defend the Empire against its many foes, both within and without. Parts have been previously published as *A Circus Of Hells* and *The Rebel Worlds*.

Isaac Asimov's *Guide to Earth and Space* Fawcett Science, first time in pb, \$4.99. An understandable nonfiction book with Asimov's answers to over 100 common questions about the universe.

Janet and Isaac Asimov: *Norby and the Oldest Dragon* Ace SF, first time in pb, 160 pp, \$4.50. Norby the Robot is invited to the birthday party of the Grand Dragon of planet Janyn, and when reptile meets robot, sparks fly.

Margaret Wander Bonanno: *Star Trek: Probe* Pocket Books SF, first time in pb, 352 pp, \$5.99. Sequel to the movie *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*.



The mysterious probe that almost destroyed Earth reappears. . . .

Ben Bova and Bill Pogue: *The Trikon Deception* Tor Thriller, first time in pb, 320 pp, \$5.99. The U.S., Japan and United Europe created Trikon, an orbiting space station lab, to find a way to keep Earth from dying of pollution. But the Trikon is threatened by a lethal blend of espionage and sabotage.

Ben Bova: *Triumph* Tor SF, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. In an alternate-world 1945, Allied forces rush to take Berlin . . . and, in Moscow, Joseph Stalin struggles against a mysterious terminal illness.

Ben Bova: *Voyagers III: Star Brothers* Tor SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.95. Corporate and political leaders struggle for control of an astronaut who has been merged somehow with a powerful alien intelligence through the nanotechnology within his body.

Gillian Bradshaw: *In Winter's Shadow* Bantam Spectra Fantasy, first time in pb, 352 pp, \$4.99. Conclusion of Bradshaw's Arthurian trilogy. Through Arthur's beloved Gwynhwyfar, the empire endures a love so sustaining, yet so destructive, that it shall pass into legend.

Jeff Bredenberg: *The Man in the Moon Must Die* AvoNova SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.50. The Telcomp can transfer anyone anywhere, molecule for molecule, instantly. But a technical glitch duplicated Benito Funtici, sending a copy of him to the Moon, and leaving the original Benito earthbound to fight for his life and his identity.

Don Callander: *Aquamancer* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Pyromancer*. A beginning Aquamancer sets out to learn the mysteries of water magic . . . such as the proper making of tea for prognostication.

Don Callander: *Pyromancer* Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.50. The first adventure of the Pyromancer Douglas Brightglade, the Wizard Flaman, and the Bronze Owl.

Orson Scott Card: *The Call of Earth* Tor SF, hc, 304 pp, \$21.95 (leather-bound limited edition \$200.00). *Homecoming* volume 2. A select few on the planet Harmony must overcome their conditioning against technology to help repair the orbiting Oversoul.

Orson Scott Card: *The Memory of Earth* Tor SF, first time in pb, 384 pp, \$4.99. *Homecoming* volume 1. The planet Harmony is under the care of the Oversoul, an artificial intelligence. But systems are failing and, if peace on Harmony is to survive, the Oversoul must return to lost Earth for repairs.

Jack L. Chalker: *Children of Flux and Anchor* Tor SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$3.99. Volume 5, the conclusion of the *Soul Rider* series. Someone has found the key to the magic of Flux, threatening the World's delicate balance and hard won peace.

Adrian Cole: *Thief of Dreams* AvoNova Fantasy, first U.S. pub, 384 pp, \$4.99. *Star Requiem* Book 2. Pursued by the Csendook death machine, the last remnants of humanity struggle to reach a

Key to Abbreviations

hc: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

pb orig: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



forbidden city whose ancient power offers their one chance to hold their enemy at bay.

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David Eddings: *Domes of Fire* Del Rey Fantasy, hc, approx \$20.00. The first book of *The Tamuli*, revealing what comes next in the lives of the characters of the Elenium.

David Eddings: *The Sapphire Rose* Del Rey Fantasy, first time in pb, 512 pp, \$5.99. Book 3 of the Elenium. In this conclusion of the series, Sparhawk discovers that the legendary magical jewel that can heal Queen Ehlana carries many dangers of its own.

William R. Forstchen: *The Lost Regiment: Fateful Lightning* Roc SF, pb orig, 464 pp, \$5.99. Fourth book of the *Lost Regiment* series. A mixed force of human soldiers, snatched from assorted periods of history, battle against alien Merki hordes.

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Jack Womack: Elvissey Tor SF, tp pb orig, 320 pp, \$12.95. A satirical adventure of a troubled couple who voyage across time to kidnap the young Elvis Presley and make him a demigod in a decadent urban future.

T. M. Wright: Goodlow's Ghosts Tor Horror, hc, 224 pp, \$17.95. Sam Goodlow isn't sure if he's dead or not. But psychic Ryserson Biergarten means to find out by hunting down the "gateways" between our world and the next that are allowing people and ghosts to go where they don't belong.

Jane Yolen, editor: Xanadu Tor Fantasy, hc, \$18.95. The first in an original anthology series featuring all-new fantasy stories by acclaimed American writers, including Ursula K. Le Guin's first new fantasy story in several years.

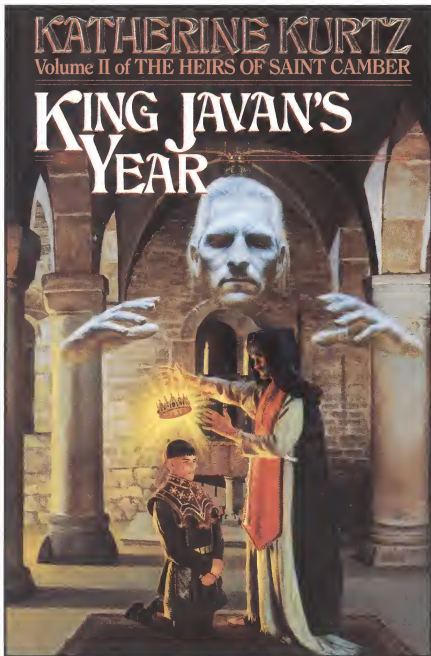
Publishers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror books are invited to contribute material to this monthly listing. For more information, contact Bill Fawcett & Associates, 388 Hickory Road, Lake Zurich IL 60047.

Looking Forward:

King Javan's Year

by Katherine Kurtz

Coming in January 1993 from Del Rey Books



Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The magically endowed Deryni have never had an easy time of it in the kingdom of Gwynedd, trying to survive and prevent others from forcing them to use their powers for evil purposes. In what may be the liveliest and most powerfully written of the Deryni novels, this situation is certainly true for the newly crowned King Javan. Added to the normal intrigue of his biracial court is the Byzantine intervention of a group of powerful outsiders—enemies that may themselves be Deryni. In this excerpt, King Javan has to resort to some unkingly behavior—and the use of his own special powers—as he tries to discover the truth about those who have plotted to abduct his brother.

A letter arrived after about a week, accompanied by Prince Rhys Michael's signet ring and what appeared to be a little toe—and a statement that the senders had no wish to maim the prince by cutting off a finger, but would do so next time, if King Javan did not begin complying with their demands.

Receipt of the toe sent Javan into anguished panic. He knew that the abductors were not whom they claimed to be,

Cover art by Michael Herring

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but could not reveal that he knew so. Nor had he any real idea who they actually were—though his imagination supplied ever more unpleasant possibilities as the days wore on. Whoever they were, they were torturing his brother, and Javan could neither find them to stop them nor accede to their demands.

His Deryni allies tried to ease a little of the tension by throwing the uncertainty into public light. Within a few days of the arrival of the demand letter, the real Ansel MacRorie sent a statement disavowing any connection with whomever had sent the demands and reiterating his continued loyalty to the House of Haldane, even from exile. He also assured the king that though he had been nowhere near Grecotha at the time of the prince's abduction, he had his men working there now, looking for the real abductors of the prince.

Hubert naturally dismissed this as specious, declaring that of course Ansel would claim that, after the fact, when he realized that his threats were not going to get him what he wanted. That made as much sense as any other explanation, at least to the rest of the Council, but it pleased Javan not at all. Hostility toward the Deryni Ansel increased dramatically after the receipt of his letter, and several members of the Council even suggested that the Ramos Statutes should be tightened even more and dragnets put out to find the impudent Ansel and finish him, once and for all.

More days passed, and Javan became increasingly convinced that Paulin and Hubert knew more than they were letting on. Both men assured him of their concern and a desire to help, and he never caught either of them in an outright lie, but both sometimes went to great lengths to avoid answering precisely the question he had asked.

They were hiding something, but he dared not accuse them. He knew it was too risky to try to press Paulin for information he was determined not to give, especially when the extent of the Vicar General's relationship with the mysterious Dimitri was unknown. He might be protected. Archbishop Hubert, though hardly without risk, was a much more likely prospect. Javan had meddled before, where Hubert was concerned. The trick was to get Hubert alone and in a frame of mind such that he would suspect nothing.

It took the better part of a week for Javan to find his opportunity, after several days of laying careful groundwork. He could do little else, so long as he received no new demands from his brother's abductors. On a Sunday late in November, when Javan knew that Hubert and Not Oriss would be officiating at solemn Vespers and Benediction down in the cathedral, the king put on a suppliant's face and betook himself to divine services there, closely cloaked and hooded both against the cold and casual recognition and accompanied by Charlan and Guiscard as was his usual wont.

The congregation was small, for winter was settling in with a vengeance. A moderate snowfall earlier in the week, followed by rain, had left the streets a quagmire of mud and puddles now turning to icy patches, for new snow had been flurrying as Javan and his compan-

ions made their way down from the castle mound. To his relief, Paulin was nowhere in evidence either before or after the service, and what few worshippers had been present did not linger once the participating clergy had withdrawn to the sacristy.

The great cathedral grew very quiet as the last of the altar candles were extinguished and the responsible acolyte retreated. Hubert was still in the sacristy. Javan could see its only door from where he remained kneeling far back in the choir, his hood pulled up. Eventually Hubert appeared, turning to give some final instruction to someone still inside.

Drawing a fortifying breath, Javan rose and headed toward him, Charlan and Guiscard trailing at a discreet distance. Hubert looked up at their approach, one hesitant hand on the sacristy door, not pulling it closed until Javan pushed back his hood to reveal his identity.

"Excellency, may I speak with you?" he said.

"Oh, it's you, Sir," Hubert said coolly. "If this is in the nature of official business—"

Javan shook his head and bowed it as he sank to one knee.

"It's personal," he whispered, hoping Hubert would extend his ring to be kissed. "I—have need of a priest."

"I believe a new royal confessor has been appointed, Sir," Hubert said. "Has your Highness found him to be unsatisfactory?"

Abandoning the ring ploy as an excuse to touch Hubert, Javan got to his feet, keeping his head slightly bowed over folded hands.

"I'm sure he is admirably qualified for his position," he said. "This matter—touches on older concerns with which you are already acquainted." He swallowed nervously before offering the next persuasion. "You gave me good counsel then, and I didn't heed it. I've done a great deal of soul-searching in these past few—could we go somewhere private? Your quarters, perhaps? I can't really discuss this, standing out here."

The archbishop inclined his head, the blue eyes unreadable in the cherub face, and gestured toward a side door.

"Very well, my prince. The accommodations are modest, but they serve my purpose well enough—a place to lay my head at night, which even the Son of man hath not."

Catching the allusion, Javan promptly responded, "Saint Luke," and chanced a faint grin at Hubert, knowing the archbishop would not have expected him to pick up on the reference. "Shall I give you chapter and verse, as well?"

To his relief, Hubert responded with a pleased if slightly wary chuckle, leading him through the door and along a polished corridor. Charlan and Guiscard followed silently behind.

"Now, I wonder," Hubert said. "Is that the bluff of a man who wants me to think he remembers the full citation, so that I won't ask for it, or do you really know?"

"Saint Luke, chapter—nine, I think." In the old days, before Javan had been under Hubert's instruction before entering seminary, it had been an intellectual exercise

they both had enjoyed. *"The foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man bath not where to lay his head."*

"Not that an archbishop really has to worry about a place to lay his head," he added, as they approached a polished door with the episcopal arms of Valoret painted on it. "You know, this would be far more impressive if the arms were carved, like the door back at Valoret."

Hubert smiled and pushed the door open without looking. "Why this apparent effort to make me recall old times, Sir? I had great hopes for you. I was greatly disappointed."

As they went through, Charlan and Guiscard took up posts to either side, their backs to the wall, exchanging apprehensive glances. Inside, through a small vestibule, Hubert led the king into a small, cozy parlor with a fire blazing cheerily in a modest fireplace. An elderly priest had been mulling wine in an earthen pot set on the hearth and went at once to fetch another cup when he saw that the archbishop had company.

Not speaking, Hubert lowered his bulk into the largest of the three chairs set before the fire and pushed his fur-lined cloak back off his shoulders, gesturing for Javan to take the chair beside him. Javan laid his own cloak over the back of the other chair, then moved the remaining one a little closer to his host. Until the old priest had come and gone, he dared do nothing more overt.

"Thank you," he murmured, settling into the chair. "I'm sorry I've been such a trial to you. May I—make what I have to say to you in the nature of a confession?"

"Is it a confession, my son?" Hubert asked quietly.

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose it is—or may become one," Javan replied, falling silent as the priest came back in with an extra cup and knelt by the hearth once more, to ladle mulled wine into both.

"Thank you, Father Sixtus, you may go to bed now," Hubert said when the priest had delivered the steaming cups. "I shan't need you more tonight."

Bowing, the priest withdrew through another door and closed it. Hubert sipped at his wine and said nothing, gazing distractedly into the fire until the sound came of another door closing, farther away.

"Very well, Sir. Father Sixtus will not disturb us further," the archbishop said at last. "You may assume that the purple stole is about my shoulders and that what passes between us shall be held under the seal of the confessional. What did you wish to discuss?"

Sighing, Javan set his cup aside and shifted forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and letting his hands dangle between them as he intertwined his fingers. He needed to get at Hubert for a proper probe

concerning his part in Rhys Michael's abduction—which was far more difficult than the simple control and blurring of memory he had imposed on the archbishop the morning of Alroy's death. For one thing, Hubert was paying close attention tonight—if no longer quite suspicious, then certainly curious about why Javan had sought him out.

Further, the control required for a proper probe required physical contact—and that could turn dangerous, if Hubert somehow guessed what was happening and tried to offer physical resistance. Javan did not know whether a cry for help would carry beyond his own men waiting outside the door, but he did know that in sheer physical bulk, he was no match for Hubert.

"These last few weeks have made me think quite a lot about what it means to be king," he said softly, a vague enough opening that was certain to get Hubert's attention. "I thought I was ready to handle it, but when they sent me Rhysem's toe—"

He shivered and buried his face in one hand—the hand farthest from Hubert—but also leaving cracks between his fingers so he could see.

"I'm afraid, Father," he whispered. "They're going to kill my brother. They've demanded that I do something I can't do, but if I don't—"

"My prince," Hubert murmured, leaning forward. "You mustn't lose heart. We'll find him in time. You'll see."

Shaking his bowed head, Javan let his shoulders shudder in a feigned sob, at the same time *willing* the archbishop to reach out to him.

"I know you have to say that," he whispered. "I know it's meant to be comforting, but—"

In that instant, as Hubert's hand reached across to pat Javan's shoulder in sympathy, Javan shifted to cover Hubert's hand with his, surging controls across the bond of flesh.

Hubert blinked as Javan raised his head to look into his eyes, held by the grey gaze as well as the hand grasping his. Alarm flickered briefly across the cherubic face, disappearing utterly as Javan raised his free hand to touch Hubert's forehead between the closing eyes.

"Thank you, Archbishop, we'll make this quick," the king said, slipping to his knees at Hubert's feet, just in case Father Sixtus came back after all. He took both Hubert's hands in his, resting them on the archbishop's purple-covered knees, then settled onto his haunches to bow his head over the joined hands.

Thus poised, he sent his mind into Hubert's to query regarding his brother—and gasped at the scope of the plot so revealed, hatched primarily by Paulin and Albertus but fully endorsed by Hubert. . . . ♦

Looking Forward:

Higher Mythology

by Jody Lynn Nye

Coming in January 1993 from Warner Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This third book in the popular *Mythology* series continues the humorous and dramatic saga of Keith Doyle and his elven friends. When they take on a local polluter, they end up having to deal with kidnapping, politics, and thugs. In this battle they have two secret weapons: a hot-air balloon and magic. This excerpt shows how both are used in an attempt to recover the elves' kidnapped children.

"Six hundred feet!" Tay squeaked, staggering away from the edge. "I thought we'd be lifting thirty or forty feet to clear the trees!" He sat down in the bottom of the basket with his head between his knees and began to moan. Holl made a wry face.

"We live close to the ground," he explained to Frank, who was looking concerned. "We barely so much as climb trees."

Keith kept an eye on the altimeter as the balloon continued to rise. The *Iris* swept into a northeast wind and began to sail in the direction Holl said the girls' trace lay. He peered into the distance, hoping to spot landmarks.

"Well, where are they?" Frank asked, when they reached five thousand feet. He glanced around eagerly. "In this temperature I can go to fifteen thousand if need be."

"Please don't," Tay begged from the floor of the basket.

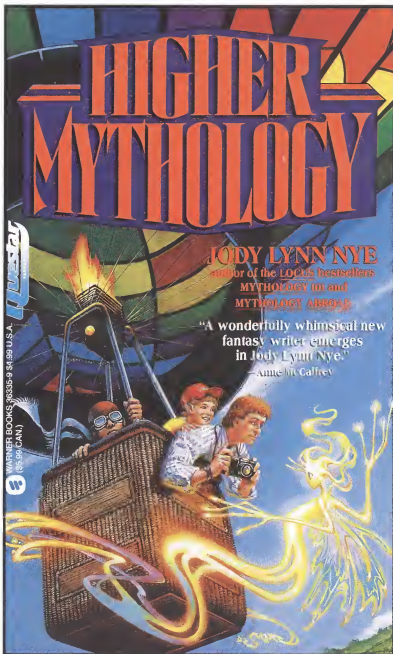
Keith grinned at the pilot. "I thought you didn't want to meet any more supernatural beings," he teased.

Frank squared his skinny shoulders. "Guess if they're up here, I ought to know."

"If it wasn't all your imagination in the first place," Holl said to Keith.

"Both of us saw it, right, Frank?" Keith said. The pilot nodded. "They'll be here, honest."

"I don't care if flying dragons appear," Tay



Cover art by Don Maitz

said, hunched among their feet, "so long as they're willing to help me find my daughter."

The dream vision of a sunrise interrupted the conversation. Holl stared at Keith. "What's wrong with my mind?" he asked.

"It's them," Keith said, and began looking around for his new acquaintance. The blue-white tail of the sprite looped swiftly past them around the balloon basket, until the delicate figure was level with them beyond the sheet cables.

"There it is!" Keith said, pointing. "Holl, Tay, look."

Tay glanced up briefly at the milk-colored creature, who blinked amiably at him, and went back to groaning with his head held in his hands. "Such things belong up here," Tay said. "All I wish is to get down to the ground where I belong."

Holl held his breath. He and the sprite stared at one another for a moment, and the young elf broke the silence with a sigh. He cocked his head at Keith. "Well, I owe you an apology. If anyone could find an imaginary being in the stratosphere, it would have to be you."

"Thanks," Keith grinned. "I'll spare you the 'I told you so.' He brought up his camera and showed it to the sprite. "Can I take your picture?" he asked. "I'd like to show some other people that I met you."

Take? Please do not take from our substance. The mental picture of a diminished sprite, looking woeful, appeared.

"Um, it doesn't actually take anything from your substance," Keith explained hurriedly. "It's only a reflection of you in my camera lens which hits a kind of light-reflective paper. Harmless. I promise."

Timidly, the airborne creature inspected the camera, and its mental vista turned rose-colored. *All right.* It backed up, whipping its tail like a rudder.

The sprite held itself still, but showed its agitation in the way its extremities flapped as if caught in a light breeze. Keith pushed the shutter release. *That didn't hurt at all,* the sprite sent to him in surprise.

As if its approval was a signal, another and another winged being joined them, until the air was filled with sprites all signalling their image of sunrise to greet their fellows and the party in the balloon. Few were the same size as Keith's original acquaintance. Some were tiny enough to fly up his camera lens if it had been hollow. One was nearly the size of the balloon. It looked like a friendly hurricane coming close to take a look. Frank goggled, but he kept control of his craft through sheer will power. Holl looked around in wonder.

"The Master will be glad of those snapshots," he said with a sigh. "I hope we'll get to know these good folk better later on. How shall we begin this search, then? Will one guide us the way?"

There was a hasty conference among the sprites. Most of the diaphanous beings swept away with a swift day-dream of sunsets left behind as farewell. The party was left with Keith's friend, a larger one who pushed itself forward importantly, and a few of the smaller creatures.

Following the sprite's direction, Frank steered the *Iris* into a northward current.

"Full tanks, nice day, cool weather, last a long time," the pilot said, nodding.

"Then we will begin," Holl said.

The two elves pooled their strength and began the search for the children. Their sense spread out like a sensitive layer on the sky that could feel all the topography of the land below it, except that it sought mental touches, not physical. Keith connected with it a little, but couldn't follow it far. That kind of command of talent took years of practice, and a lot more magical oomph than he had. After a while Tay rubbed his eyes.

"It's the same trouble as before," Holl said. "There is something in the way that lifts and lowers between us like a heavy curtain. I sense them only part of the time, but this wispy friend of yours is indeed going toward the scent." He smiled at the hovering sprite, who made a rosy glow at him. The larger apparition narrowed its large pupils and twisted in the wind to point forward.

"Make sure you tell me when you want to land," Frank said. "No second chances here. Can't turn around."

"If we can," Holl said. "It depends greatly on what our friends tell us."

The large sprite stayed ahead of the balloon, glancing over its shoulder to make eye contact with Keith or Frank. The original sprite stayed back with the balloon, hovering companionably near Frank.

"The trace is very strong ahead," Holl said. "No, I've lost it. It winked out just like that." He looked at Tay hopefully, but the silver-haired elf shook his head.

Beneath them, the green cropfields had given way to a huge industrial center. Bare earth stained by greasy overflow supported corrugated tanks and pipelines.

Trucks ran among them, and minute workers in khaki coveralls hooked up pipelines to the tank trailers. At the same time the sprite broadcast the yellow-green sky image of warning, the occupants of the balloon were hit by a wave of stench that surrounded and stifled them.

"Ugh, horrors!" exclaimed Tay.

"That's Gilbreth Fertilizer down there," Keith said, coughing. "Look at all that leakage from the tanks. I bet there's half a dozen health violations right there."

Holl's expression suddenly changed from revulsion to enlightenment. "They're down there!" he cried.

"The children?" Keith blinked. "At Gilbreth?"

"Yes! I felt them, just for a minute, safe and well. That chemical soup is blocking natural sense. Go back!"

"Can't!" Frank said, regretfully. "We can't change the wind." They were passing over the buildings now. Shortly, they'd be beyond the property's edge.

Keith got a sudden inspiration. "Drop her!" he cried.

Frank nodded sharply once and yanked the parachute release. They heard the outrush of air, and saw a burst of sunlight up inside the dome as the great rainbow bag irised open on top. Swiftly, the balloon dropped toward the earth. Keith gritted his teeth as the earth rushed toward them. Wind whistled in his ears.

"Ah, no!" Tay groaned, falling to his knees on the padding at the bottom of the basket. "I'll never leave solid ground again." ♦

A Troll of Surewould Forest

Part Three

Thomas M. Disch

Chapter Twenty-Five

The White Skyscraper

When you're in love you discover that the world is an entirely different place than you used to think. You used to think the subways were grungy and dismal, and instead, due to the tons of n*cl*er wastes stored along the sidings, they have this beautiful radioactive shimmer you've never noticed before. You used to think that almost everyone on the street was walking around half-dead, whereas you now realize it was you all along, that all of reality had been unwinding in your head like a tape going through a player whose batteries were so low that the zippiest tunes were turned to Muzak. Most of all you used to think you were alone and probably deserved to be, and now not only are



Illustration by Lillian Lake

you not alone but your personal worth has been authenticated by the one person in the world whose opinion you set most store by, the person you love and who, amazingly, seems to love you.

For Joe there were two other important differences between the Innacity he'd been walking around in earlier in the afternoon and the Innacity he'd returned to now as he bounded up the subway stairs at the 23rd Street exit. The first difference was that now the great urban alphabet soup of signs and ads and newspaper headlines was making sense eighty percent of the time. Joe didn't even have to slow down to read the slogan in the window of the Puritan Fathers' Savings Bank and Fish Shop:

Save your money, trust in God,
Every Sabbath have some scrod.

Or the good advice spelled out in letters two feet high across the facade of Princess Cassamassima's Detergent Boutique:

Shine the silver, scrub the pot,
Make the most of what you've got.

What a friendlier place a city becomes once you know what all its letters are trying to tell you. Not that anyone really *needs* a sign in the window of a hairstylist, since you can just look through the window and see the hair being styled. But it's thoughtful, like people saying "Hello" and "Have a nice day." Joe felt the way a bee must feel when he goes into his hive and hears all the other bees buzzing around him, a feeling that life was brimming over with information and shared purpose.

The second important difference between the city Joe was in now and the one he'd left that afternoon was that this one only existed in Joe's imagination—and in the imaginations of the other visitors to Surewould Forest still sharing his scenario. The wall he'd just gone under via the stacks of the X Collection wasn't the real wall around the forest but only, as I explained earlier, a symbol. Joe was still physically inside the little cell he'd been in all along, still dreaming the dream engineered for him by the technicians of United Avatars. Indeed, by going under the wall he'd intensified the nature of that dream by a factor of 18.5, which is how much the odds increase against you in roulette if you've been betting on red or black and then decide instead to risk your money on a single number.

Joe, however, didn't notice the ways in which this purely mental Innacity differed from the real one. It didn't seem strange or unusual that the buildings along 21st Street were all skyscrapers, or that the pavement was as smooth as a dance floor, or that an orchestra somewhere out of sight was playing "This Is the Great-est State in Creation" from the musical smash *A Million Women*. All that mattered to Joe was that there ahead of him was the number 21 carved into the pure white marble of the tallest of all the skyscrapers lining 21st Street, and there on the balcony just above that 21, with the

moonlight blowing through her hair and rippling down her dress like water spilling across the shoulders and over the hips of a statue dancing in a fountain, there was Artemesia.

She was so much more beautiful than Joe had remembered that for a moment he thought he must be making a mistake. Life couldn't be intending for him to ring her doorbell, cross her welcome mat, and, as the songs say, take her in his arms. Could it? Him, Joe Doe, a nobody who worked at a nothing job in a nowhere neighborhood, and her, Artemesia Albatross, the Queen of Love and Beauty?

Maybe life was not intending that, because at just that moment the telephone in Joe's hat started ringing. He was certain without answering it that he knew who would be calling, since the only time anyone ever called him on the phone was when Bob, Pizza Bill's nighttime delivery boy, didn't show up for work and Pizza Bill would ask Joe to take his place. *I just won't answer*, Joe decided, but it was a hard decision to stick to, since the phone went on ringing all the while Joe was explaining to the doorman at the door of 21 West 21st that he had come to visit his friend Miss Albatross. The doorman seemed to find this hard to believe, possibly because of the way Joe was dressed.

"Miss Who?" the doorman insisted, as the phone rang again.

"Miss Albatross," Joe repeated. "Artemesia Albatross. I *know* she lives here. I saw her on the balcony just as I was coming up the sidewalk. It's the balcony right over the number cut into the marble."

"Just a moment." The doorman went to a telephone and dialed a number. Then, cupping his hand over the receiver to keep Joe from hearing what he said, which Joe couldn't have anyhow with the phone still ringing away inside his hat, the doorman explained to Artemesia that there was a suspicious character in the lobby who'd been watching her while she was on her balcony. He suggested calling the police, but Artemesia said no, she was expecting a visitor, send him right up.

So with much less mess and bloodshed than had been involved in slaying the dragon, Joe gave the doorman a friendly smile, stepped into the elevator and was past the second major barrier between him and eventual, all-around success.

Meanwhile, the phone in his hat would not stop ringing. Undoubtedly you've been in a similar situation and know how annoying it can be. You've just buttered a slice of warm toast, and the phone rings, and you *know* who it is and that he's the last person you want to talk to, and anyhow even if it's only a wrong number, your toast will be cold by the time you get back to it. Or you're watching a quiz show on tv and the contestant you've been rooting for is about to win \$10,000 or a trip to Hawaii or a new Corvette, and the phone, which is in another room than the tv, rings, and you *know* who it is, because she's already called you five times that day at the office, and while you can appreciate that she's upset and can even sympathize to a degree, even so you do want to hear the question that so much is going to de-

pend on. And yet, if the telephone keeps ringing long enough, it doesn't make any difference, you'll sacrifice your toast or your curiosity and answer it because after all it might be something important.

You might, but not Joe. He just got out of the elevator when it got to the second floor and went to the door of Artemesia's apartment, which was Apartment 21, and rang the doorbell and hardly even noticed the ringing inside his own hat, he was that excited.

The door was opened not by Artemesia but by a lady robot dressed like a Southern belle in a hoop skirt made of old curtains. Clusters of radish-red curls peeked out of a frilly lace cap to frame a brightly painted, smiling face.

"Ah do declare!" declared the lady robot. "Ah do declare! Ah do declare!" She shook her clustered curls coquettishly, dropped a curtsy, and emitted a loud hum.

"Hello," said Joe, whose experience with robots was very limited. "I'm Joe Doe, and I'm, um, looking for the apartment of—"

"And in good tahn, too! Ah was beginning to wonder if you would ever arrahv. The kitchen is through here."

"The kitchen? But I—"

"Ah trah to do mah best, Ah'm sure," the robot continued, in the Southern accent of A.D. 2992, which, even more than the Southern accent of our own time, was based on the substitution of Ah-sounds for I-sounds with all other sounds unchanged. Had it not been for the continuing popularity of *Gone With the Wind*, it's doubtful whether even that much of the original dialect would have survived a thousand years of cultural homogenization. "Ah *trah* to give mah dear mistress a home to come home to, a home to come home to, a home to come home to, but Ah'm only a single domestic applahnce, Ah can only do so much, it is not mah fault, Lord, Lord, Lord!"

The hoop-skirted, sausage-curved robot glided into the kitchen and picked up a large glass jar of Skippy Anchovy Paste from the marble counter. She handed it to Joe. "*Here* is the offending article. Ah am not ashamed to confess Ah have been defeated. Ah am only a lady's companion. Ah was never intended for feats of strength."

"You want me to open this jar, is that what you're saying?" Joe asked.

"Well, what do you think, young man? Ah did not summon you to make a fourth at bridge!"

Joe sensed that his identity was once again being mistaken, but opening a jar of anchovy paste didn't seem any big deal. With his left hand he got a purchase on the jar, then gripped the metal cap firmly in his right hand and twisted. There was no give. "This is really on tight," he said. He tried again, using his unbuttoned jacket to get a better grip. Still nothing.

"Oh me, oh mah," fretted the lady robot, "Miss Albertine so rarely has a gentleman come calling, there really must be a tray of canapes, and apart from this anchovy paste and a jar of capers the cupboard is quahnt empty, quahnt empty, quahnt empty. Ah hope you will be so kahnd as to overlook mah occasional malfunctions, Ah have checked mah circuits tahn and tahn again but Ah *cannot* fahnd the offending chip."

It was then Joe remembered his invisible ring and the strength it was supposed to lend to the hand that served its ends. Was this one of those ends? He decided to give it one more try, and this time, almost without effort, the jar came open and a pungent aroma of long-dead anchovies filled the kitchen. This unmistakable smell, together with the continued ringing of the phone in Joe's hat, made him think of pizzas and of Pizza Bill, but only for a moment, since something the lady robot had said had given Joe an uneasy feeling.

"Did you say Miss *Albertine*?" he asked, handing the opened jar to the lady robot. "Are you sure that's the name of the young lady who lives here?"

"Ah am as sure of that, young man, as Ah am sure of mah own name, which is Aunt Cocopuff. Ah realahze Ah have mah little lapses, little lapses, little lapses, but Ah believe Ah know mah own dear mistress's name."

"And it's not Artemesia Albatross?"

"Not here outside the walls of Surewould Forest," said the welcomest voice in all the world.

Joe spun around and saw Artemesia standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Artemesia!"

"Beloved!"

As they embraced, Aunt Cocopuff turned aside, her blush light faintly glowing, and began to spread globs of anchovy paste over crisp wafers of Amalgamated Sodium's Krispy-Salts, which are guaranteed to be saltier than any other snack food or your money back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

From Quite a Q

The living room was decorated all in white. There was a fluffy white rug and shimmery white curtains and white lamp shades on white lamps and a white marble coffee table in front of a sofa upholstered with a chintz that had big white flowers against a delicate pink background, the same pink as the pink of Artemesia's cheeks.

Artemesia sat at one end of the sofa and patted the cushion beside her for Joe to sit there, which he did, though not without wondering whether he ought to, considering the condition of his clothes.

"You're so beautiful," said Joe, "and your living room is beautiful too."

"Then you'd say that I'm a product of my environment?"

She seemed to be teasing him, but that was okay. Seeing him in these grungy clothes here where everything was so clean and spotless, he could understand how she might be having mixed feelings.

"I wouldn't say," he said, "that you're a product of anything. Sometimes I feel like I'm a product, or I used to before I met you. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference, isn't it?"

Now it was Artemesia's turn to be confused. "Between what and what?"

"A person and a product. Like your Aunt Cocopuff,

for instance. I mean, she seems a whole lot more human than I'd expected a robot to be. Not so much the way she looks, that's not exactly human, but the way she acts."

"Yes, she's a dear thing, but that side of it can be disconcerting. I often wish I'd opted for a less anthropomorphic model—one of those little domed things that go about on treads, or a cuddly little Pandamatic. But I never could resist a bargain, and K-Mart was dumping Aunt Cocoopuffs for a fraction of the price of an ordinary bottom-of-the-line Hoover. What I didn't realize then was that the model was being discontinued. It's almost impossible now to get replacement software. If I wanted to cure Auntie of her repetition compulsion, I'd have to spend twice her original purchase price for a single house call by a good behavioral psychologist. I just don't have twenty million dollars to throw away."

Which meant, Joe figured in his head, that Aunt Cocoopuff had cost as much as he earned in ten weeks at his job. It seemed a lot to pay for a robot that couldn't even open a jar of anchovy paste, but of course the real reason people bought robots wasn't for the work they did, since there were always people who could do the same job for less money. People bought robots because they were lonely, and because, since robots were expensive and fragile, they made good status symbols. There were millionaires in the Money Islands who kept entire robot households, which they visited only once or twice a year. The rest of the time their robots just had to busy themselves playing croquet and working jigsaw puzzles. It was a good thing, Joe thought, that those robots weren't actually alive, since if they had been, their lives would have been unbearably boring.

"Albertine!" Aunt Cocoopuff called from the kitchen. "Answer the phone, will you, mah dear. It's been ringing ever since I started making these canapes."

"Oh, that's the phone in my hat," said Joe. "Don't pay it any attention; I don't."

"But what if it were something important?" Artemesia asked.

"There's nothing important in my life but you," said Joe matter-of-factly. "Why does your Aunt Cocoopuff keep calling you 'Albertine'? Isn't your name really Artemesia?"

"Yes, in Surewood Forest. But here on the other side of the wall I've been going by the name of—"

"Albertine!" Aunt Cocoopuff called more loudly. "That telephone is drahring me crazy, drahring me crazy, drahring me crazy. Ah implore you—answer it!"

Artemesia—or Albertine, if that's who she was now, though Joe had compelling reasons to hope otherwise—gave him a look that asked, wouldn't he, for her sake, answer the telephone?

Joe took off his stovepipe hat and reached inside and answered the phone.

"Well, finally," said Pizza Bill.

"Bill, I can't talk to you right now."

"I wasn't calling to pass the time of day, Joe. I need you here. This is Pledge Week at Innacity U. I've got seventy-four pizzas that have to be delivered, and there's more orders coming in—so get the h'll over here."

"Bill, I can't. Something else has come up. You'll have to get Bob."

"I just fired Bob. And you're next if you don't get your b'tt over here on the double."

Pizza Bill hung up, and Joe returned the phone receiver to his hat. "That was a friend of mine," he said, which was true as far as it went. "He wanted me to come over, but I told him I was busy."

"Thank you for answering it," said Artemesia, or Albertine, as the case might be. "Auntie has certain circuits that can put her into a flutter if nothing is done."

It's mah soldering," said Aunt Cocoopuff, sweeping into the room regally with a tray of canapes and a spray can of Blue Dahlia Air Freshener. "Ah have very delicate soldering. On a rainy day Ah can tell you who's toasting a piece of toast anywhere in this building."

As with one hand she offered the tray of Krispy-Salts—each with its own rosette of anchovy paste and a single caper at the center of the rosette's soft, gray petals—with the other hand she squirted a fine mist of air freshener about the room. When both her mistress and Joe had accepted a single canape, she sat down in a white bentwood rocker and continued to squirt the air freshener into her own face.

"Ah don't know *what* can be the matter," she fretted. "There is such an *odor* in here tonaht. Nothing seems to help."

"It must be your olfactory circuits, Auntie," said Artemesia, or Albertine, blushing, for she knew quite well that the smell the robot was objecting to was coming from Joe's clothes, though naturally she was too polite to say so.

"No," said Joe. "It's me. These clothes I'm wearing haven't been washed for a long while. How I happen to be in them is a long story, which I'll tell you later if you like, but first if we're going out to dinner I'd kind of like to change. Would you have any idea what had happened to the Brandname suit I was wearing at the Tournament?"

"It must have gone to the cleaner along with my dress. But my dress came back, so I imagine your suit did too. Do you want me to phone and find out? I've got the cleaner's receipt here somewhere with the phone number. Meanwhile, if you'd like, you could put on something of my father's. You're about the same size."

"Hey, that would be great. Except won't he think it's a little funny if he comes home and finds me wearing his clothes?"

"Oh, Father's home now. In a manner of speaking."

"Mr. Whaht is a subject we generally trah to avoid in this household," said Aunt Cocoopuff, squinting herself with the air freshener.

"Now, Auntie, you'll be giving Joe an entirely false impression." Artemesia, or Albertine, turned to Joe with a bright but not entirely sincere smile. "I believe Father's collar size is 14½. Would that do for you?"

"Oh, I'm not particular," said Joe. "Any size you've got is fine."

"You maht say that Mr. Whaht is the skeleton in our closet."

"Speaking of closets, Auntie, would you go look in

Father's room and find a change of clothes for Joe? That would be so useful."

Aunt Coccapuff rose from the rocker with a simulated, thrice-repeated sigh of resignation. "It is a robot's hahest delight to be useful, to be useful, to be useful. Ah shall be raht back."

"Sometimes," said Artemesia, or Albertine, "I think she conceives of herself as my duenna. I'm sure I don't know what I've done to make her like that. The operating manual, though, does say that kind of character transformation is usually the result of a long interaction, so she must be picking up on unconscious cues that I'm sending out. But enough of Aunt Coccapuff—you didn't come here to discuss my domestic appliances, did you?"

Before Joe could think of any answer beyond "No," the phone in his hat started ringing again.

"Now I understand," he said, "why people pay the extra twenty thousand dollars a month to have a silencer gizmo on their phones."

"Is this *anchovy paste* on my Krispy-Salt?" Artemesia, or Albertine, asked in a tone of amazement. She seemed totally unaware of Joe's phone or of what he'd just said.

"I guess so. It's the stuff that was in the jar I opened for your Aunt Coccapuff."

"You opened the jar?"

"Yeah, she asked me to, so I did. Why, is it spoiled or something?"

"Come with me." She rose from the sofa abruptly. "It's time I introduced you to my father."

"Great. But, um, couldn't I change first? Here comes your aunt with the clothes. I'm sure I'd make a better first impression if I wasn't looking so . . . scruffy."

"Joe, if you make any impression at all, I'll be in your debt forever. I'll be *doubly* in your debt forever. Auntie, whyever didn't you tell me that Joe had opened the jar of anchovy paste?"

"Because, mah dear, Ah wanted the canapes to be a surpahse."

"They were that. Don't you realize what this means? Have you forgotten the gypsy's curse?"

"The gypsy's curse?" repeated Aunt Coccapuff. "The gypsy's curse? The gypsy's curse? *What* gypsy's curse?"

"One day," Artemesia, or Albertine, explained, "long ago, when I was returning home with a bag of groceries that included that same jar of anchovy paste, a gypsy woman outside the A&P demanded that I buy a nosebag from her. When I refused, she placed a curse on me. She said that that same day I would commit a terrible crime that I would regret for many years, and that I would live with the consequences of that crime until someone was able to open the jar of anchovy paste in my shopping bag. And you've opened it! The curse is lifted! At last my terrible crime can be expiated!"

"What terrible crime was that?" Joe asked.

"I was just about to show you. But you're right—first you had better change into something a little . . ." She looked for a word, and found: ". . . plainer. Aunt Coccapuff, will you show Joe where the bathroom is?"

Joe followed the lady robot to the bathroom, but I am *not* going to describe Artemesia's, or Albertine's,

bathroom. There are some things that have no business being written about, and details concerning people's bathrooms certainly have to be among them. Imagine if someone were to barge into your house without warning and go into your bathroom and start broadcasting all that could be discovered there over public radio.

Anyhow, once Joe was inside the bathroom—which you can imagine as being exactly like your own, if you need a more rounded picture—he answered the phone in his hat.

"G*rrsh d'm it, Bill, I told you once already that I can't come in to help, tonight of all nights. I'm in love. I'm getting married, if I possibly can. And right now I've got to put her father's clothes on. Have a heart, will you, and let me off the hook."

"Is this Joe Doe?" asked a voice that was not the voice of Pizza Bill.

"Huh?" said Joe.

"Is it or isn't it?"

"Um, yes, sure. Who's this?"

"This is Renzo di Vita. My brother left a message on my answering machine saying that you are someone he is looking out for and that you might be interested in working at the post office. True or false?"

"True," said Joe. "Very true."

"The Civil Service test is in half an hour. Be there."

"Where?"

"The Post Office, dum-dum, where do you think?"

"Which Post Office?" he asked—but too late. Renzo di Vita had hung up. It was also too late to say how sorry he was about Enzo being killed at the Tournament of Poses. Ah, well.

Joe changed out of Sh't's dirty clothes and into the clean clothes Aunt Coccapuff had given him, including a clip-on bow tie with battery-powered turn signals—a style of clip-on bow tie that was so old that it was already coming back into fashion.

"Well, how do I look?" Joe asked, stepping out of the bathroom.

"You look just fahn. Now stop preening and come along to the billiard room. Ah don't lahk to think of Miss Albertine in there alone with her father. It always puts her into such a melancholy frame of mahnd."

"Her father—didn't you say his name was Watt?"

"Of course. Mr. Tahrone Ah Wahaht. There was a tahn, mah boy, when Mr. Wahaht was one of the most respected citizens of Innacity. A vahce-president, no less, of General Ahtems. Ah, yes, we were a proud family in our day."

"And that's her last name, too? Watt, not Albatross?"

"Albatross? Whah would a nahce young lady call herself bah such a name as Albatross?"

"From a sense, dear Auntie," said Artemesia, or Albertine, who stood in the doorway of the billiard room, "of intolerable and never-ending guilt. And for that same reason, and at the same time, I changed my extra-sylvan, day-to-day name from Artemesia to Albertine, so that always, when a friend or colleague at work would address me as Albertine, I would hear an echo of that guilty *nom de jeu*, Albatross."

"Does all that mean that your name isn't really Albertine, that it's really . . . what?"

"No, *Wbabi*," corrected Aunt Cocoa-puff. "As in the what-man's burden."

"Artemesia White," said Artemesia, with the smile of a masquerader at the moment of being unmasked, a smile, that is, that is both mischievous and apologetic.

"Boy oh boy," said Joe. "That's a relief."

"And now, if you would like to meet the source of all that guilt"—Artemesia stepped to the side of the doorway—"may I introduce my father, Tyrone White."

At the far end of an Ideal Frictionless Pool Table, spotlighted by a glaring overhead light, was a white statue of a man stooping forward, cue in hand. To judge from the position of the balls on the table, the statue was intending to try a bank shot that would sink the 5-ball in the corner pocket just to the right of the tip of the cue. A tricky shot, Joe thought, but not impossible. Joe liked to play pool, so he was glad to find he had something in common with Mr. White, wherever *he* was. Joe squinted into the gloom beyond the cone of brightness defined by the overhead light, but there was no one there.

"I guess your father has gone off somewhere," said Joe. "There's nothing in there but that statue."

"That statue," said Artemesia forlornly, "is my father. He has stood in just that position for twelve years now, ever since the night I came home with that gypsy's curse on me. That evening Father challenged me to a game at this same table. As ever, his skill exceeded mine. Just as he was about to sink the 5-ball—and he knew he would, you can still see that in his face—I sneaked up behind him and . . . Oh, I shall never forgive myself!"

"For what?" Joe demanded.

"I meant only to jar his elbow and spoil his shot. Instead, I somehow lost my footing and inadvertently plunged my billiard cue into his back just above the right kidney. See, it is lodged there still."

"A tragic tale, mah dear," Aunt Cocoa-puff said mournfully, "but you must not go on bearing such a burden of guilt, such a burden of guilt, such a burden of guilt. You didn't *mean* to petrify your father."

Joe walked around the billiard table to where he could see the wooden cue projecting from the back of the stone figure.

"And you think this is connected to the curse that that gypsy put on you?" he asked.

"I can think of no other explanation," said Artemesia. "The instant the cue pierced his flesh, the color fled from his cheeks and he became the stony effigy that you see now. But since you've been able to open that jar of anchovy paste, which no one has ever been able to do before, though every man I've ever dated has made the attempt, perhaps you'll also be strong enough to pull the cue from his back and restore him to life."

"Do you think he's still alive?" Joe asked skeptically.

"Oh, quah, quah, quah," declared Aunt Cocoa-puff.

"How's that again?" asked Joe.

"She said, 'Quite,'" Artemesia interpreted.

Suddenly Joe remembered the last message he'd read in the book that the old wise owl had given him:

If from Quite you take a Q,
Dial 911-1912.

At once, taking his cue from that rhyme, Joe breathed on his invisible ring, buffed it on the 200% cotton shirt he'd borrowed from Mr. White, and then wrapped his hand around the billiard cue. With one mighty tug he unsheathed the cue from its stony scabbard—and slowly the white marble statue was suffused with the colors of life, an ochrish tan with olive-tinted shadows and highlights of unripened peach and dusky cream.

If you take the Q-sound from the word Quite, then the sound that is left is . . .

"Mr. White?"

Joe held out his hand in greeting to the revived and somewhat startled father of his bride-to-be.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, sir. My name is Doe."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Meanwhile, in Hollywood

Zillionaire movie mogul Bonifacio Bonifacio—or B.B., as he was known throughout the entertainment industry—had just sat down by his poolside Louis XV desk to write up a preliminary budget for United Avatars' new epic adventure, *L-5, Lord of the Elf-Hive*, when the buzzer that announced a major new talent went off, and the mogul's top-ranking yesman emerged from his cabana with a box of El Erecto Corona Cadillac cigars.

"You're not going to believe this, B.B.," announced the yesman, "but it looks like the *L-5* casting call has been answered—by a cherry someone picked from the Big Bowl in Innacity."

"A cherry for *L-5*? You've got to be kidding. Who's this 'someone' picking cherries in Innacity?"

The yesman consulted his wristscreen. "She's a receptionist, third-grade, in the Surewold Forest concession. Seems she was sent out on an intervention, and what started out as an ordinary job of rewiring has ended up as nothing less than a major discovery."

"Or," B.B. suggested, twirling one of the Corona Cadillacs with a skeptical air, "a major short circuit."

"Naturally," said the yesman, snapping a flame for his boss's cigar from a 48-karat gold n*c1**r-powered lighter, "we ran a check on all the components in the situation before buzzing you. The figures tally. This guy's natural profile is as close to your classic superduperstardom curve as you'll see outside an economics textbook. And get this—today is his first dip in the Big Bowl. He went in on a standard admission, and in the course of one afternoon he's learned to read, won a major event in a tournament, got a new suit, been bonded as a troll, and *then* he went under the Wall, slaying a dragon in the process. I mean, is that archetypal or is that archetypal? Plus finally, of course, he pulled the traditional sword

out of the traditional stone, which is what started the buzzers buzzing."

"So?" B.B. frowned at his cigar thoughtfully. He didn't like to express overt enthusiasm in front of his own yesman. "So maybe he got lucky. The bottom line is—does he have charisma? That's the bottom line."

"Charisma? You've never seen such charisma. Dorks look at this guy and assume automatically that he's a dork. Elves and fairies just the same. Whereas, in fact, as I said, he's a troll."

"Straight?"

"As an arrow. Despite, I should add, some strong disincentives. It would seem his first scriptwriter has a rather pronounced misogynic streak. But so far the guy's handled that like a charm. Already his second scriptwriter, the one who went out on the intervention, is head over heels."

"So tell me, what stone has this young Everyman been hiding under? Does he have a name? How old is he? Why wasn't he tagged and put under surveillance ten years ago?"

The yesman consulted his wristscreen. "Like I said, this is only his first dip. But he's not that old, still shy of twenty-one. His name's Joe Doe, but the Publicity Department's already processing a change from Doe to Palooka."

"You all seem to be awfully confident about this."

"Believe me, B.B., when you see him you will be too."

"So what are we waiting for? Set up the screen."

The yesman clapped his hands, and at once two assistant yesmen rushed out of the cabana with a portable viewing screen, which they set up in front of the mogul's desk. B.B. pretended, meanwhile, to be studying his preliminary budget.

The screen flickered and came into focus and there was Joe, still in the billiard room with Artemesia and her n*d*r family. She had just explained to her father how he had spent the last twelve years as a marble statue, an idea that Mr. White at first strenuously resisted, until, at Aunt Coccoapuff's suggestion, he consulted his Tahmex. Joe, naturally enough, had taken a back seat during this stretch of exposition.

"I wouldn't call this contagious excitement," said B.B. "All I see is another pretty face."

"Wait," said the yesman.

As Artemesia was introducing Joe to her father and describing his chivalrous behavior at the Tournament of Poses, the phone in Joe's hat started ringing again. Aunt Coccoapuff went to the phone on the wall of the billiard room and said, "Good evening, Whaht residence, Aunt Coccoapuff speaking." But of course the phone in Joe's hat went right on ringing.

Finally Joe excused himself to Artemesia and her father, stepped out into the hallway, and took the phone out of his hat.

"Joe?" said the voice of Pizza Bill.

"Bill, I told you once already, not tonight. Any night but tonight. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

"What we've got here," the yesman explained for the mogul's benefit, "is your standard conflict between on

the one hand love and on the other duty. See, it's the kid's boss who's calling him, asking him to deliver pizzas, 'cause the other delivery boy's been canned."

"I thought you said this guy's gone over the wall."

"Under it, actually," said the yesman.

"You mean to stand there in your Jantzen and tell me that *in real time* this discovery of yours is nothing but a pizza delivery boy?"

"B.B., that is the stuff that legends are made of, Can't you see it now in the *Evening Scoop*: 'From Pizza Bill's Pizzeria to superduperstardom in 24 hours?'"

"Besides that—look at him. He's *short*."

"So? Alan Ladd was short. Not quite as short as this Palooka, but nearly."

B.B. puffed on his El Erecto defiantly. "Alan Ladd was a g*d-d-mn*d midget."

"Wait, B.B. Wait till you see him smile."

Joe, meanwhile, up there on the screen between the pool and the Louis XV desk, was still resisting Pizza Bill's threats and appeals. Artemesia appeared for a moment in the doorway of the billiard room, and Joe smiled at her.

"There, what did I tell you?" said the yesman. "With a smile like that, who needs a screen test?"

"He needs a screen test!" B.B. knew he was being maneuvered, but he also knew how important it was for his yesmen to think they were making his decisions for him.

"One screen test, coming up," said the yesman, signaling to the assistant yesmen, who were looking out from the cabana. They in turn sent a confirmation to the screen test engineer, who flipped the actual switch that set the screen test into motion.

"Joe," said Pizza Bill in a huskier tone of voice, "I wasn't going to tell you this, but if I can't get those pizzas out tonight and have the money to show for it, I may be in hot water with the mob. So this isn't just any night for me either. This is a matter of life or death. Joe, I'm begging you—*please*."

Joe could hardly believe his ears: Had Pizza Bill said "please" to him? He didn't entirely credit his story about the mob, but just that unexpected show of courtesy was enough to change his mind.

"Okay," he said grudgingly. "I'll try and book our dinner at the Parking Lot Cafe for later, and I'll come up and help you out for a couple hours. But no longer. Okay?"

"Thanks," said Pizza Bill. "I won't forget this."

"You're welcome," said Joe, and hung up.

You could tell just by the look in his eye how much that simple "Thanks" had meant to Joe. *Please* and *thanks* really are important concepts, and if you learn nothing else from reading this book, I hope you'll learn at least that.

While the phone was still in his hand Joe remembered the last message in his book and quickly dialed the number given in that message—911-1912.

"Congratulations," said a recorded voice. "You have just won an evening of fun and excitement at Ten-Pin Lake, Innacity's leading facility for the trendy new recreational pastime of water bowling! Water bowling is

guaranteed to amuse and challenge your entire family. If you like ordinary bowling *and* surfing *and* polo, imagine how much you'll like them when they're all combined in a thrilling evening at Ten-Pin Lake. This offer expires at ten P.M. tonight. To receive your two free tickets, simply recite the following jingle to the gate attendant at the entrance:

Want to bowl in heavy surf?
Make Ten-Pin Lake your piece of turf!

Thank you, and have a real nice time."

"He's going water bowling for his screen test?" B.B. asked incredulously. "What kind of kinky-dink, *ssb*ck-w*rds incompetent is handling casting for me?"

"Hold on, B.B.," the yesman soothed. "The tickets aren't for him. They're to keep the girlfriend and her father on a back burner while we run the screen test."

B.B. contemplated his Corona Cadillac in a mollified way. "So don't keep me in suspense. What's been lined up?"

The yesman consulted his wristscreen. "First, a love song. Then a patriotic speech. Finally a quick set of improvis based on *Jimmy Carter and the Dorks of Mars*."

"Sounds fine to me."

The yesman signaled to the assistant yesmen, and the assistant yesmen gave a go-ahead to the sound engineer, who flipped the switch that activated the orchestral accompaniment to the Love Theme from the musical smash, *Psychology 101*.

The camera came in for a medium close-up of Joe as he stood, once again, out in front of the white skyscraper, gazing up at the moonlit figure of his beloved. He took a deep breath, placed his hands over his heart, and sang in a clear tenor voice:

Psychology 101 Love Song

More than all siblings, a father, a mother,
You are my Significant Other.

No motivation can move me so much
As the sound of your voice or your fingers their touch.

Your name, when I spell it, would seem to erase
All other relations of time and of space.

More than all siblings, a father, a mother,
You are my Significant Other.

With you at its center how simple each maze.
If time were no factor, how long might I praise
Your affect, your posture, your strength, and
your scope.

With you as its object how blissful my hope.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Pledge of a Legion

Going to work in the morning can often be a drag, but going to work at night is ten times worse, since you know that everyone else in the world is just getting ready to settle down in front of the tv or heading off for a night on the town or maybe engaging in f*r*pl*y, while you, luckless slave of your wages, are heading in exactly the opposite direction. And the wages you're slaving for are probably not even that terrific either, since nighttime jobs generally pay peanuts. True, after you've worked at such jobs for a while you get used to night and day being turned inside out and you get to prefer being off work when the sun is up and stores are open and kids are locked away in schools where they can't bother you. But Joe didn't customarily work for Pizza Bill at night, and to be called in for overtime work tonight of all nights seemed a major unfairness.

So if an excuse must be provided for why as he passed by the Post Office on the corner of 32nd Street and 8th Avenue he decided to go in and inquire about the Civil Service test that Renzo di Vita had called him about, instead of heading uptown to the Pizzeria as a strict sense of duty required, the excuse could be that sense of unfairness. But Joe had a still better excuse than that, which was the invisible crown he'd been given in Chapter Twenty, when he was initiated into trolldom—the crown described, but not explained, in the trolls' mystic anthem:

A crown there is with magic powers
To lengthen minutes into hours.

Joe's trollish ring had demonstrated what ads call Proven Effectiveness. With its help Joe had opened a jar of anchovy paste that had defeated all other attempts, had pulled the cue out of Mr. White's back, and had slain the dragon in the X Collection. So Joe figured that his crown could be counted on too.

In reality, of course, there are just twenty-four hours in a day, and only so much can be done in those twenty-four hours, though if you concentrate on what you're doing, you'll be surprised how much more you're able to do than you first thought possible. So, if you want to think of Joe's crown as another symbol, like the wall, *et* what it would symbolize is that heightened power of Concentration, and you might add to that the power of Literacy as well, for there's an undeniable connection between the one and the other, reading being one of the best ways there is to concentrate and focus the mind, which is the reason children have to be put to the cruelty of being sealed up in school and made to sit down and plug away at books that are not innately interesting.

That's the aspect of *reality* that Joe's crown could symbolize. However, the Innacity he was in now was no more part of reality than the Land of Dreams had been. Here time could be stretched out like melted cheese as it comes dripping down gooiily off a spoon, and this was

fortunate, considering all that Joe would have to accomplish before he could get back together with Artemesia and go out to dinner at the Parking Lot Cafe, which had, obligingly, allowed them to change their reservation to eleven. That didn't leave a whole lot of time for Joe to pop his question or Artemesia to reply, but Joe was assuming, rightly or wrongly, that Artemesia's readiness to go to dinner with him betokened an equivalent readiness to marry him. It is a common assumption among young men in love.

Inside the Post Office Joe looked around for someone to ask about the Civil Service test, but the only people in sight were the people waiting in the long line that snaked back and forth in front of the row of barred windows. Only one of those windows was open for business. Behind it an elderly postal clerk was showing a young lady dork the right knots to use to tie her package so that it could be sent by the Special 5th Class Trans-City Slow Rate instead of by the costlier 3rd Class Local Parcel Rate it would have to be mailed at with the knots she'd originally used. Unfortunately, in the process the much-frayed string broke, and the clerk was obliged to mend it with red sealing wax, a time-consuming process, since the candle he was using for melting the wax would not stay alight.

Meanwhile, the people in the long line continued waiting, as people in lines have done, time out of mind. Those nearest the window displayed visible signs of impatience, fidgeting and tapping their feet, while those farther back passed the time by reading and talking. At the very end of the line two people appeared to have gone to sleep, or, at least, to have entered a trance state, and one woman, smiling beatifically, went through the motions of conducting the solemn *Largo* from Handel's *Xerxes* that issued, almost inaudibly, from the Post Office's P/A system.

Joe took his place behind the woman conducting Handel's *Largo* and watched the line of windows, hoping another would be opened soon. But as the minute hand of the clock moved from 6 to 7 to 8 and then to 9 this hope gradually faded. Twice the *Largo* had looped back to its beginning by means of *da capo* repeats. Two of the people who had been talking unfolded camp stools and set up a chessboard between them.

At last the lady dork's package was properly tied, weighed, stamped, insured and sent off on a conveyor belt into the dark recesses of the Post Office unknown to the civilian population. Everyone waiting on the line, except the two sleepers and the woman conductor, looked toward the window expectantly. It was a vain expectation. The lady dork bent down and took another parcel from her shopping bag. "There's this too," she said. "It's going to Botswana, and it's a bottle of figs, so be careful with it, it's very fragile."

"Figs, you say?" said the postal clerk.

"Yes, dried figs."

"I think dried fruit takes a special form. I'll have to go look at the book." Whereupon the postal clerk pulled down the bars in front of his window, put up a sign that said he would be back in ten minutes, and himself dis-

appeared into the dark recesses into which the package had been conveyed.

"Oh, boy," said Joe. "I'm getting a feeling that this is going to take forever."

The woman conducting Handel made no response to his observation, unless the somewhat broader sweep of her imaginary baton could be construed as a way of her suggesting that she be left alone.

Everyone, including Joe, waited a while longer. The *Largo* looped back to its beginning once again. One of the chess players said "Check." One of the sleepers twitched as a fly settled on his nose.

Finally, when the minute hand reached 12, Joe decided that waiting any longer would be ridiculous. He left his place at the end of the line and went out into the street, where he practically walked right into the postal clerk who'd gone off to look up the rule for sending glass bottles of dried figs to Botswana. He was waiting for a street vendor to make him a taco. It looked like this would take a while, as the vendor had just started grinding the corn for the taco shell on her *metate*.

"Pardon me," said Joe to the postal clerk, "but I wonder if you could tell me where I'm supposed to go to take the Civil Service test."

"What Civil Service test?" the postal clerk asked suspiciously.

"For working in the Post Office."

"Where did you hear there was going to be a Civil Service test?"

"From a friend of mine, Renzo di Vita." It was stretching the truth to say Renzo was a friend, but when you're looking for a job the truth always has to be stretched a little.

"Renzo sent you?" whispered the postal clerk. He gave the street vendor a fifty-thousand-dollar bill and told her to keep the change. "Come on," he told Joe, "you can take the test right now." He led Joe around to the back of the Post Office and through the door marked *Staff Only*.

"I don't know if I've got time to actually take the test now. I only stopped in to ask when and where the test would be."

"Here and now," said the postal clerk, pressing the button by an elevator.

"But if it takes very long . . ."

"Don't worry. You'll be in and out before you know it. It's a simple test."

"I shouldn't be taking you away from your job like this. There's all those people in line and you're the only one to help them."

"What do you think the line is *for*?" asked the postal clerk. "It's *for* waiting in. That's how they achieve satori."

"What's satori?" asked Joe.

"Wait in line long enough," said the postal clerk, "and you'll find out. Ah, here we are."

The elevator had reached the fiftieth floor of the Post Office. Joe followed the postal clerk through a meadow of desks where hundreds of elves were busy at work weighing and registering letters in large ledgers and examining the knots of packages with magnifying glasses.

Though they all seemed quite intent on what they were doing, Joe was having misgivings as to whether he was cut out for this line of work.

"You know what—" he began, but the postal clerk cut him short.

"In there." The clerk pointed to a door that was marked *Test*.

Joe went through the door, and a lady elf in a polka-dot dress gave him a form to fill out. It was a more complicated form than the form he'd filled out at the Dorkery, but even so he breezed right through it.

First he filled in his name, JOE DOE, and then his address, DYER STREET RESIDENCE HOTEL, and then when it asked, "Who is your boss?" he wrote down PIZZA BILL.

The next question was, "Who is your boss's boss?" Joe checked the box marked "I don't know."

The last question was, "Do you want to be your own boss?" Without stopping to consider that checking the "Yes" box might be a tactical blunder in terms of getting a job at the Post Office, he checked the "Yes" box.

Joe returned the form to the lady elf, who in turn handed him a slip of paper covered with writing. "This is our Loyalty Oath," she explained. "Have you any objections to taking a Loyalty Oath?"

"Not that I know of," said Joe. "Should I?"

The lady elf smiled. "Of course not. Now raise your right hand, look into the camera, and read the oath from the paper."

Joe raised his right hand, looked dead ahead, lifted the paper up to where he could see the small print, and delivered the following patriotic speech with a force and sincerity that would have reduced even harder hearts than the heart of Boniface Bonifacio to jelly:

Loyalty Oath to the City of Innacity

I pledge a legion to the flags
Of the benighted neighborhoods of Innacity
And to the metropolis in which they stand,
One urban conglomeration, individual,
With libraries in just about every borough,
And a single good museum
That connects the present to the past,
And a skyline that can make you gasp,
And acres of flowers and trees in pots,
And certain special pastries unobtainable
anywhere else,
And a different way of pronouncing the
diphthong -oy,
So that when a boy meets a girl in Innacity
And falls in love and feels love's joy,
It is a uniquely wonderful experience.
Home of my friends, you're really grand,
And those who live here understand
The motto on our shopping bags:
"We pledge our legions to your flags."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Anchovy Pizzas for Mars

"What did I tell you, B.B.?" the movie mogul's chief yesman enthused. "Is this kid dynamic?"

"I was moved," B.B. conceded.

"Charisma, sex appeal, and that special something extra that has no name."

"I call it niceness," said B.B. "And it's very rare."

"Niceness!" The yesman slapped his forehead with the shock of recognition. "That's it! That's what he's got! He's nice!"

"But can he sustain it? Can he build on it? Can he rise to heroic niceness?"

"That's what we'll find out now," said the yesman, signaling to the assistant yesmen, who gave a nod to Edgar Rice Pudding, the studio's head scriptwriter, who gave a thumbs-up in reply and plugged himself in to Surewould Forest via United Avatars' private satellite, whereupon with no more transition than the instantaneous *ping* of a parabola as it swings around from plus to minus Joe found himself in Pizza Bill's Pizzeria, and Pizza Bill was handing him the slip with the address to which he was supposed to deliver a stack of seven anchovy pizzas—the Mu Mu Mu Fraternity House on the campus of Innacity University.

"Hey, Bill," said Joe, "what's this stuff about you owing money to the mob? I thought you'd sworn off gambling."

"You can bet your bottom dollar," said Pizza Bill, "that I've learned my lesson now. But there isn't time to discuss all that. Those pizzas are getting cold."

So, wasting no more time on unwelcome questions, Joe set off for Mu Mu Mu Fraternity House with the seven anchovy pizzas. He didn't even need to practice his newly won reading skills to read the address on the slip. He could have found his way to the Mu Mu Mu Fraternity House in his sleep, he'd delivered that many pizzas there over the course of his career as a delivery boy for Pizza Bill.

Needless to say, the plot being slung together by old Edgar Rice Pudding in the basis of his classic screenplay for *Jimmy Carter* and the *Dorks of Mars* was not going to take Joe to Mu Mu Mu. It was going to send him to Mars by the nearest available n*d*c**r-powered flying saucer, which hovered overhead just long enough for Joe to do a double-take, then sucked him up, SCHLOOUFF! into a medical laboratory aboard the saucer, where Joe and the anchovy pizzas were given prolonged medical examinations.

There ensued a long and not always logical story, involving, among other tense situations:

Joe's escape from the medical laboratory and his rescue of the beautiful LaBelle Lance from the wizened clutches of the thousand-year-old D. M. Thomas, who was not—the Rice Pudding script seemed to suggest—entirely *human* any longer, and who wanted to compel LaBelle, by reading his own poetry to her for minutes on end, to sign over all rights to her famous autobiogra-

phy *This Too Shall Pass*, so that he could reprint it under his own name, for no book was safe from the promiscuous plagiarism of the mad poet.

An epic battle between a handful of staunch dorks fighting for democratic values and hordes of mouthless Martian Futuroids, in the course of which Joe rescued Jimmy from his ancient enemy, Mohammed Ming, disarming the fiendish Ayatollah with one mighty *blip* of his lasersword, whose name was Larry, following which Joe snuck aboard the Futuroids' gigantic canal-boat by disguising himself in the clanking armor of a vanquished Futuroid archer and sailed up the Forbidden Canal to the Ruby City of Lhust.

The gladiatorial combats in the Lhust Municipal Auditorium between a blindfolded Joe, assisted by a battery-less Larry, and everything and everyone the United Avatars Special Effects Department could afford to summon from the databank for a screen test, including a school of giant mutated whiptail stingrays, a Futuroid rapist, the rapist's vengeful wife, whose hair was a horrible tangle of writhing, hissing spaghetti, and fourteen clones of D. M. Thomas—whose identity had fallen into the public domain, despite the fact that he was still alive.

Finally, there was the banquet celebrating Joe's victories during which he witnessed the abominable rites of Lhust. At the end of those rites Joe got up and delivered a short but impassioned speech, which he read straight from the prompters without a single flub, in which he exhorted his Futuroid hosts to adopt a philosophy, like his own and Jimmy's, of Secular Humanism, Fair Play, and Mutual Respect, which the Futuroids agreed to do—all but a dissident few, since Rice Pudding always made provision, even in screen tests, for the possibility of a sequel. The banqueters applauded Joe, and the grateful LaBelle Lance announced that in Joe's honor the Ruby City would change its name from Lhust to Doeville.

"Well?" demanded the yesman, trying not to seem overly smug as the United Avatars logo flashed across the poolside screen. "What do you think, B.B.?"

"I think," said the mogul, looking down at his budget with a sated smile, "that Rice Pudding needs a vacation." The yesman looked taken aback.

"And," B.B. added, "I think that you and I should high-tail it to Surewould Forest. Tell my secretary to program two good disguises, and tell her to make it snappy. We've only got till midnight."

"You mean—"

"I mean that if I know anything about show business, MGM/GM has already got a mole in the Big Bowl."

"I'll bet it's that Coughdrop!" the yesman exclaimed in alarm, for he'd witnessed all of Joe's adventures in a condensed version edited by Rothbart Silverbowl. "And she's still got the Golden Ruler!"

The mogul threw his smoking El Erecto Corona Cadillac into his swimming pool. "Then we'd better head for the makeup department right now. There isn't a minute to spare!"

Chapter Thirty

The Parking Lot Dream Ballet

By the time Joe had gotten back downtown to 21 West 21st Street it was ten thirty-five. The reservation at the Parking Lot Cafe was for eleven. Even so, when Mr. White answered the door and explained that his daughter would be a bit longer, having gotten her hair wet while water bowling and being still in the process of drying it in the hair-care room, Joe did not let his impatience interfere with his basic duty to take a friendly interest in the old fellow's account of his and Artemesia's bowling scores.

"I must admit I was a little rusty at first," Mr. White said, adjusting his tie, which was the perfect complement to Joe's, complete with turn signals, but in green. "After all, it's been twelve years since I've put on a pair of flippers. But I got back into the swing of things soon enough. I'm sure if I hadn't wrenched my back in the last frame, the exercise would have done me a world of good. So I must thank you again for letting me use your ticket. Sorry *you* had to miss the fun."

"There's always next time," said Joe brightly.

Mr. White's tie signaled a left turn, which indicated his greater seriousness. "You had to work, I gather."

"Uh, yes."

"And what work do you do? Something in the food industry, I think my daughter said."

"That's so," said Joe. He signaled to the right, meaning *Let's change the subject*. "Though lately I've been thinking I might take a position at the Post Office."

Mr. White paled perceptibly. "And why would you want to do that? Food is such a solid, recession-proof business."

"I feel I could, um, help people to, um, achieve satori."

Mr. White's tie stopped winking. All the elan he'd exhibited discussing his bowling scores had leaked out of him like air from a shocked soufflé. "That's too bad," he said with a sigh. "Somehow I'd been hoping that . . . But no matter—it was a foolish hope."

"Hey," said Joe, "don't talk like that. There's *always* hope."

"Not at my age," said Mr. White, looking more woe-begone every moment. "No one wants to hire someone who's spent the last twelve years of his life as a statue. Oh, I will go through the motions of sending out resumes and such. Ten years as a figurehead at General Items ought to count for something. I could be a figurehead again, I'm sure I could. The problem is just getting a foot in the door. And that was my foolish hope, you see. I thought *you* might arrange an interview with your concern. But of course if you're with the Post Office . . . I've never been good at tests, and that's how they do all their hiring, isn't it? Still"—Mr. White's left turn signal began to blink feebly—"maybe you could put in a word with your old employer before you leave."

"With Pizza Bill? Oh, no, Mr. White, I don't think so. You wouldn't be happy working for him."

"I understand that I have to reduce my expectations. I

don't ask to be a figurehead again at once. A position in middle management, even in *lower* middle management, would do, to begin with. I'm very good at telling people what to do."

"Mr. White, you don't understand. It's not a big company. It's just a pizza parlor. There's just Pizza Bill and me. He makes the pizzas and I deliver them."

"Oh," said Mr. White, with a stiff martyred smile of the kind that overpolite people accord to jokes they haven't understood. "Oh," he repeated, switching off the light on his tie. "Excuse me a moment." He got up stiffly from the sofa and went into the hair-care room, where Artemesia was drying her hair.

At first all Joe could hear was the whirr of the hair dryer. Then Artemesia's voice rang out: "You'll have to speak up, Father. With this hair dryer on I can't hear a word you're saying."

"I said," Mr. White shouted as quietly as possible, "are you aware of what that young man does for a living?"

"Yes, Father. He delivers pizzas."

The hair dryer went VVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVV.

"How's that?" Artemesia's voice was like a lighthouse beacon cutting through fog. "You'll have to speak up."

"I *said* you can't possibly be serious about this."

"About what, Father?"

"About a boy who delivers pizzas. I cannot believe you mean to have dinner with—with—"

"With the man who saved me from rape and brought you back to life?"

"That's all very well, Artemesia, but pizzas—really!"

The hair dryer stopped in mid-VVVV, but Artemesia did not lower her voice. "Actually, Father, it's none of your business. I've been looking after myself for twelve years now I'm very glad you're not a statue any more, but that doesn't give you any right to say *whom* I'll go to dinner with."

Whom! Joe thought with a thrill of wonder. *She called me whom!*

"There, there, my dear. You needn't raise your voice. Indeed, there's no reason you should not enjoy a night out with the young man. He *seems* quite respectable, and dresses with a certain flair. But I do think I should offer to reimburse him for the water bowling tickets. And I don't think that, after tonight, you should—"

"Father, if you say one more word against Joe, I'll put that pool cue right back where Joe found it. I didn't dust you every day for twelve years in order to have you return to life as Lord Capulet. Now do up the buttons on this evening glove, will you? I can't go out with one glove unbuttoned."

A moment later Artemesia, resplendent in a low-cut red evening gown with long red evening gloves and red dancing slippers, entered the all-white living room, looking more than ever like a red, red rose. Her hair bounced on her shoulders and twisted sideways with the slightest motion of her head just like the hair that's been trained to appear on tv in shampoo ads.

Mr. White did not return to the living room with his daughter. He had been defeated—not so much by his daughter's threats as by her beauty. It may also have

struck him that Artemesia was not the kind of person to fall in love with a delivery boy unless that delivery boy was, in effect, a prince in disguise, as in the classic musical comedies of . . . What were their names? Sophocles? Euripides? It had been so long since he'd been to college. He sighed with the sadness that comes to all fathers as their children grow up—up and away from them—but which comes most poignantly to the fathers of daughters as beautiful as Artemesia.

Aunt Cocoa-puff, however, being only a robot and having no such compunctions, did not let the young lovers depart without accomplishing the final duty she'd been programmed to carry out. Just as Artemesia was leading Joe onto the balcony, the lady robot glided forth from her storage cabinet beside the tv, holding aloft the bottle of Chateau L  th  -Rothschild that Artemesia had purchased in Chapter Seventeen.

"Miss Artemesia! Do not forget your wahn!" Aunt Cocoa-puff yoo-hoed.

"Thank you, Auntie." Artemesia took the bottle of wine from the robot and handed it to Joe. "Would you take care of this, Joe? That's a love."

Joe put the bottle of wine into his stovepipe hat, which was now so full of various things, including the book the old Wise Owl had given him and his can of tuna fish from the Goddess Fortuna, that it almost wouldn't go back on his head.

"Good bye, Auntie." Artemesia stepped out onto the balcony, where the moonlight immediately began to make arpeggios of glitter in her hair. "Tell Father not to wait up. We'll probably be quite late getting home."

"Good bah, mah dear. Be careful flahing."

There was a little gate in the railing of the balcony. Artemesia opened it, spread her wings—which had been spray-dyed the same brilliant red as her gown—and leapt through the gate into the balmy evening air, taking hold of Joe's hand as she rose and sweeping him off his feet.

Behind them Aunt Cocoa-puff waved a tiny lace-edged handkerchief. Above them wispy clouds raced before the moon. Beneath them the traffic of Innacity pulsed through its major arteries. And all about them the voices of the Ambrosian Chorus sang of the glory of flying.

The song the chorus sang is one, alas, whose music and lyrics are copyrighted and may not be reproduced here. In any case, unless we were in flight ourselves, we could not discern that song's soaring melody nor comprehend its inspiring words. To earthbound hearers the music accompanying their flight would be inaudible or would come across as a kind of indistinct humming, like a refrigerator in another room or the buzz of cars on a faraway turnpike.

And just as I cannot duplicate that song, so I cannot begin to suggest the beauty of Innacity as the loving couple flew above it. The great metropolis was a vast web of colored lights and obscure names, varied here and there by the play of fountains and the shimmer of foliage, but you would have to be looping in and out of that web and swooping about those obscure names, you would have to feel the spray of those fountains on your

skin and be grazed by the leaves of the trees in the park, to begin to get any sense of the sheer fun they were having. Really, for all that can be said in favor of reading, there is finally no substitute for experience. So I shall make no further effort trying to eff the ineffable. I will just recommend that you try it yourself.

No, wait a minute, there is one aspect of Innacity's architectural majesty that I will have to try to describe, since that is where Joe and Artemesia landed and where they were to dance their beautiful dream ballet—namely, the famous parking lot across the street from the Parking Lot Cafe. Every major city these days has its own great parking lot that tourists come to see, but there was probably no parking lot anywhere in the world, not even at Epcot, quite as inspiring, quite as awesome, quite so able to fill onlookers with that good old-fashioned sense of wonder as the First National Municipal Parking Lot of Innacity. Two great eight-lane entrance and exit ramps wound up and wound down the northern and southern facades of the proud 50-story edifice. Between these magnificent caduceuses the many-tiered garage formed a vast urban diorama wherein various natural elements—waterfalls, stands of yew and cypress, limestone formations—were tastefully integrated with the rarest productions of art—sphinxes of ancient Egypt; two identical 100-foot-high portrait busts of the renowned architect Robert Venturi flanking, like guards of honor, an even larger copy of the thought-stirring "Mystery of Life" sculpture-group by the Italian master, Ernest Gomzzeri, so beloved by visitors to Forest Lawn Cemetery; and *all* the original Babylonian elephants from D. W. Griffith's epochal film *Intolerance*. From across the street in the cafe you would scarcely have supposed this magnificent structure had been erected merely as a place to park your car while you were at the office or shopping or seeing a show. It seemed more like the set of a movie, of all possible movies, and that, in fact, is how Joe and Artemesia reacted to it after they'd alighted on its upper deck.

There they were on the moonlit asphalt of the parking lot. The Ambrosian Chorus had just come to a smashing finale, and now the orchestra was doing a reprise, in waltz-time, of the same lilting tune. A high wind whipped through Artemesia's hair and trembled the feathers of her wings. With one accord the two lovers joined in the immemorial asymmetric embrace of the waltz and took off, winding in and out among the parked cars—*One-two-three, One-two-three*—around and about, picking up speed as the waltz accelerated, dipping, spinning, then coming to a sudden stop and reversing the spin. Sometimes Joe would swing Artemesia up into the air and she with a powerful *Whomp!* of her scarlet wings would loft *him* up on the downbeat so that together their dance described a double vertical loop-the-loop that *felt* absolutely terrific.

Sometimes they would break away from each other to spin like tops or leap atop the cars or do—flip, flip, flip—triple cartwheels spotlighted by the headlights of the cars—for by this hour a lot of theaters and movies had let out and the parking lot was quite busy. Once,

from sheer high spirits, Joe took a long run to the rock cantilevered over the 50-story waterfall and did a perfect double-gainer, trusting, as only Love can trust, that Artemesia would rescue him from certain death in the shallow pool of recirculated water at the base of the waterfall.

But even that wasn't the best part of their dream ballet. The best part was when the Wild F*ck'ng Animals came roaring up the eight lanes of the entrance ramp, weaving in and out of each other's way in elaborate, overlapping sine curves. One Chopper by itself can make a great deal of noise, but four of them traveling in a pack can be deafening. At the quieter moments of the waltz Joe and Artemesia almost couldn't hear the music—for the four Choppers didn't just pass them by when they got to the top of the parking lot. Rather, they formed a kind of roaring wreath or pinwheel about the dancers, and while Joe and Artemesia were whirled about within their waltz the wreath of revving Harley-Davidsons revolved about them. Busby Berkeley would have died.

There were D**th and Wh*r* on the largest and loudest of the Choppers, and F*ck and B*tch behind them, and behind them P'ss and T'ts—you never would have thought that P'ss had had a drop to drink, he kept to his place in the formation so carefully—and last of all were N*k* and *ss, laughing fit to bust.

I must take a moment away from the dancing here to explain that in ancient times, before paper had been invented, people didn't have anything to write on except old dried-out sheepskins, which were very expensive. Erasers had not yet been invented either. As a result, once a sheepskin was filled up completely, you would turn it upside down or sideways and write the next thing you needed to write on top of what was already written. After six or seven layers had been formed this way the result was called a palimpsest, and that is what the Wild F*ck'ng Animals and their Old Ladies' Auxiliary had become—palimpsests of tattoos. There were so many layers of dragons, eagles, daggers, bluebirds, and grimacing skulls on the eight of them that all their skin, even on their faces, was now predominantly blue. It was going to be embarrassing, even for such tough customers, to go around looking the way they looked now. It's one thing to be mean and obscene and a bit smelly, but it's something else again to look like outtakes from a horror movie. Even bikers have bounds of decorum that they expect their fellow bikers to observe, and the Wild F*ck'ng Animals had undoubtedly trespassed beyond those bounds to become outlaws of outlawdom. One has to feel sorry for them, but when you live like that . . .

In any case—to look on the bright side—it's doubtful whether, after tonight, they would continue to be Wild F*ck'ng Animals. For the time had come to say farewell to Joe and Artemesia and to vroom back to Surewould Forest and turn in their entertainment pins at the exit and go back to their lives in the real world.

And what different lives they were! In the real world D**th was no biker, and Wh*r* was not his Old Lady. In the real world D**th was a 74-year-old paraplegic war veteran, Lloyd Butz, who lived in the Innacity Home for the Hopelessly Indigent on Avenue D. F*ck, Sh*t, P'ss,

C*nt, and N*k* were residents of the same institution, and all of them had come to Surewould Forest on a day-trip sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Thanks to Joe and Artemesia and the energy generated by their storyline, these visitors from the Home for the Hopelessly Indigent had had a much more memorable day in Surewould Forest than any of them had bargained for. Indeed, one of their number, Mel Perseketski—Sh*t, to his fellow bikers—had not been able to stay the course, due to the acting up of his spastic colon during the excitement at the Tournament of Poses, while another, Abe Jackoff—C*nt, to us—who was prepsychoic and ought never have been allowed into Surewould Forest, had got scrambled in the Big Bowl, as sometimes happens. Which is to say, his mind was dispersed into its component archetypes—and good riddance, say I. He had never been any more, really, than a career criminal.

Real life is often cruelly different from the life that people were, or are, or will be able to lead in Surewould Forest, but on the other hand it is usually tamer and safer and more comfortable too, so there's no reason to complain. Maybe Mel and Lloyd, and Abe if he still existed, and Dave and Ted and Izzy too, felt some regret at leaving behind their wilder, younger, rip-roaring selves, but they must also have felt a certain relief that all those layers of tattoos would be removed by the mere surrender of their entertainment pins at the exit from Surewould Forest.

A relief that would surely be shared by the four members of the Old Ladies' Auxiliary—Monica Mercer, Mitzi Wilson, Judith Anderson, and Joycelin Shrager. All four had entered Surewould Forest on general admission tickets that afternoon in pretty much the same spirit that a Scarsdale housewife or an insurance adjuster or a high-school teacher might go to the movies, expecting a quick, refreshing dip into the collective unconscious and then, before midnight struck, back to the family, the adjustments, or the classes, no harm done and no regrets. And certainly no tattoos.

And so, as the four bikers and their four old ladies barreled down the eight-lane exit ramp, it probably came as something of a relief to each of them to hear the headphones in his or her head expressing the relieved, bivalent feelings in his or her heart:

Song of Departure

So long to the Forest
Where richest and poorest
And achingly sorest
All joined in one chorus.
So long to them all,
Oh, so long!

So long to the stories,
The manners, the mores,
The dense allegories,
The shames and the glories.
So long to them all,
Oh, so long!

Chapter Thirty-One

Lobster and Lo Mein

As the gang of bikers and their old ladies were corkscrewing down the exit ramp, other eyes than yours and mine were viewing the raptures of the two lovers whose hearts were beating in three-quarter time. Within the empty pupil of the right-hand eye of the left-hand bust of the renowned post-modernist architect Robert Venturi on the facade of the First National Municipal Parking Lot, little Coughdrop burned with desire and boiled with rage.

"Tho, you think you can thoar like a bird with *my* fianthé, do you, Mith Artemethia White! And you, my falthe Printhe Charming, would dive into her armth, would you! Well, thave the latth walthe for Coughdrop, becauthe Coughdrop hath thillg got a few trickth up her thleeve!"

With a grimace of dissatisfaction at being unable to suit her actions precisely to her words, Coughdrop withdrew from its plastic sheath—not from the too-short sleeve of her dimnd dress—the Golden Ruler, which she had purloined from Alecto's corpse. Pointing it through the vacant pupil of Robert Venturi's right eye, she crooned the following magic spell:

Now acroth the obthcure moon,
Come, theudding clouth, obey my rune!
Tarnish thilver, flood the threethth,
Thoak the loverth in their sheethth!
Therve my will and therve it well,
And thoon you'll rain with me in h'll!

Obedient to the urging of the murderous lady dwarf, tongues of blue flame shot from the end of the Golden Ruler and sped through the sky to swirl about the bright disc of the moon. Like water whirling down a drain, rain-clouds gathered from all points on the horizon to join the flames wheeling about the moon.

"Oh-oh," said Joe. "Looks like it's going to rain. We'd better get inside before it starts."

Artemesia took his hand with a smile of compliance. How sweet it is, she thought, as they rode the n*cl*r-powered escalator down to the ground floor, how cashmere-soft when you're in love to be able to agree with anything your lover says, even something so basic as advice to come in out of the rain.

As they came to the bottom of the long spiral escalator, she said, "I had no idea you were such a good dancer."

He beamed. "Then we're even—I didn't know you could fly."

"It is fun, isn't it? I don't know why I don't do it more often. Just laziness, I guess."

"It was wonderful."

They made their dash for the restaurant's canvas canopy just as the first drops of rain began to plop on the pavement. A doorman held open the door and they went inside. Joe felt a twinge of jealousy toward the doorman, because he'd have liked to have opened the door for Artemesia himself. He'd have liked to be the door held

open for her and the carpet she walked across and the maitre d' who led her to the table and the chair that bore her weight and the waiter who handed her the menu and the flower in the vase that made her smile and say, "How lovely."

"How lovely," Joe agreed.

"I suppose," she said brightly, "you know how this place got its name."

"From the big parking lot across the street?"

"No, it was called the Parking Lot Cafe well before the parking lot itself was built. Legend has it that long ago this was the Peking Pot Cafe but then the E in Peking and the P in Pot burned out on the big neon sign outside. When the repairman came to fix the sign, he confused this job with another for a nearby parking lot—and it's been the Parking Lot Cafe ever since. I hope you like Chinese food."

"It's my favorite," said Joe, without really fibbing, since even though he'd never tasted Chinese food before it would have to be his favorite after tonight just by virtue of being here with Artemesia.

Artemesia looked down at her menu, so Joe looked down at his. Love seemed to have driven his new reading skills out of his head, for almost nothing on the menu made sense except the prices, which didn't make sense either, but in a different way: \$750,000 for Ding Dong Chop, \$950,000 for Fee Fi Fu Yung, and \$1,000,000 and up for Kung Fu Lung Ha. Only yesterday Joe would have fled such prices in dismay, but today he confronted them head-on, like a soldier facing the enemy, and when the waiter was done taking the orders of the two Futuroids at the next table and came to them with his pencil poised and asked if they'd decided, Joe said, "Yes, I'd like the Kung Fu Lung Ha."

"Tuna Lo Mein for me," said Artemesia, who tended to order the second cheapest dish on any menu, that having been one of the last counsels of her dying mother, along with advice not to use public washrooms and not to mix purple with green.

"Will you be having anything to drink?" the waiter asked.

"This," said Joe, reaching under the table and feeling around in his stovepipe hat for the bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild—the bottle, you will recall, which Artemesia believed to contain a potent memory-destroying drug but into which, unknown to anyone else, Coughdrop had introduced a lethal dose of cyanide.

The waiter accepted the bottle with a little bow. "Very good. Now, if you will come with me, sir, you can select your lobster."

"Right," said Joe. He stood up, excused himself to Artemesia, and followed the waiter as he zigzagged between the linen-draped tables and out through a pair of swinging doors into a kind of courtyard at the center of which was a shallow pool in which a number of very large lobsters seemed to be engaging in a free-for-all battle. As Joe and the waiter approached the pool, all the lobsters stopped clanking their claws at each other and turned around to stare at the two human beings. They seemed annoyed to have been interrupted.

"Now where in f*ck'ng h'll are the f*ck'ng lobster nets?" the waiter demanded in a querulous tone of voice that Joe immediately recognized.

"Loser!"

"Hey there, Joe old bro!" Loser extended his middle finger for a biker handshake. "I didn't think you was going to recognize me."

"I *didn't* recognize you. You've shaved off your beard and moustache." Joe hooked his middle finger around Loser's, brought his elbow to bear against his, and threw a punch at Loser's stomach with his free hand.

"What the f*ck," said Loser, catching the punch with his left hand. "I also discovered the solution to my f*ck'ng acne problem—E-Z-Off Zit Cleanser." He spit in Joe's face, not without a certain constraint. The biker and the waiter were at war in his soul, and the waiter at once whisked a handkerchief from his breast pocket to dab the saliva from Joe's forehead.

"You look a whole lot more together," said Joe.

"I owe it all to Gonorrhil, man. That chick is a f*ck'ng goddess, man, a f*ck'ng goddess."

"I know," said Joe.

Loser frowned. "It's strange, but some ways I don't feel like I'm still the same person I was when we were bombing around in Surewold Forest."

"I know what you mean," said Joe. "I've been through some big changes myself."

"I mean," said Loser, blushing, "I feel sort of funny even talking the way we used to. Now that I'm going to be a computer programmer—"

"A programmer! No kidding?"

Loser nodded solemnly. "No kidding. Today when I saw what happened to all the old gang at Tarantula Jack's and thought how easily I could have got in the same f*ck'ng pickle, I did a major reevaluation of my life—or we did, together, Gonorrhil and me—and we decided that I've got to get my sh't together. I mean"—he blushed again—"we realized that I should start thinking about the future and make some realistic plans."

"I'm in pretty much the same boat," said Joe.

"So I spruced myself up and went to E.E.C., the Employment Enjoyment Council, and took their aptitude test. It turns out that I could have a real career as a computer programmer if I would just apply myself. And then when I showed up here for work, what do you think? They asked me to fill in tonight as a waiter! Six years I've bussed dishes and never once did they ask me to wait table. I guess my luck is changing."

"Congratulations," said Joe.

"Thanks," said Loser.

While Loser had been telling his tale, all the lobsters had scrambled up over the side of the pool and had gathered around Joe and Loser to listen and stare and make appreciative clicking sounds with their claws, for lobsters, Science has lately learned, aren't stupid at all. Lobsters have some of the most exquisitely sensitive nerve-endings that Evolution has ever come up with, though all their sensitivity is in their claws instead of in their heads, which is probably why it's that part of lobsters that has such a terrific flavor.

"I'd like to be able to shoot the f'ck'ng breeze some more, Joe old bro, but I got three other tables to wait besides yours. Here—"

He took a clothes-egg from his pocket and tossed it to Joe.

"There's your suit back from the cleaners. Gonorrhil read about the Tournament in the *Evening Scoop* and figured you'd probably come here for dinner, and she knew you wouldn't have a chance to pick your suit up, so she asked me to. That woman, she thinks of everything. The cleaners said they couldn't get the bloodstains out, so they dyed it red. So if you want to change into it—it'd look real sharp with that tie of yours—I'll just . . ." Quick as the peck of a pigeon, Loser bent down and caught one of the listening lobsters, grabbing its shell in such a way that it couldn't fight back. ". . . take this to the kitchen and boil it."

"No!" the lobster semaphored. "Oh, please, no! Take another lobster, I'm too old, I have a family, eat one of my children, don't eat me! Please!"

"Oh, one other thing," said Loser, paying no attention at all to the lobster's pleas. "When I bring the wine back to your table uncorked, you should stop me when I offer to pour it. Say that it has to breathe a while first."

"Does wine breathe?" Joe asked, amazed.

"No, but I do," the lobster protested. "And I eat and swim and interact meaningfully with my fellow lobsters. So please tell your friend to put me back in the pool. Please!"

"It's just an expression," said Loser, still paying no heed to the frantically gesticulating crustacean in his hand. "But it's considered a classy thing to say, and it's a way to cut back on the juice without looking cheap. If you go through that bottle too fast and have to order another from our wine card, you'll see what I mean."

"I'll remember," Joe promised.

Loser set off toward the restaurant's kitchen with the wine bottle in one hand and the protesting lobster in the other. Joe found his way to the men's room and did a quick change into his Brandname suit, bundled Mr. White's clothes into the egg, and pocketed it. When Joe returned to the table, his suit was the same fire-engine red as Artemesia's outfit. It was as though they'd been designer-designed to be together, a sense that Artemesia showed that she shared by the way she smiled as she touched the sleeve of his jacket.

Then she smiled a slightly different smile and tilted her head to the left by way of saying silently, "Would you look at that?" by which she meant the two Futuroids at the next table, whose dinners had arrived—two plates of the Parking Lot's Special Martian Vegetarian Dinner, which consisted of hunks of boiled celery in a thick corn starch sauce on a bed of brown rice. Being, like all their race, mouthless, the Futuroids could only stare, speechlessly, at their steaming mounds of food.

"Oh," said Joe, who knew something about Futuroid eating habits from having attended their banquet in the Ruby City of Lhust, "the waiter forgot to bring them their food tubes."

Just then Loser returned to their table with the bottle,

now uncorked, of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild. He offered to pour a drop for Joe to taste, but Joe held his hand over his glass and said, "I think we'll let it breathe a while first."

Artemesia looked astonished.

"Very good, sir," said Loser, with a wink that only Joe could see.

"And, waiter, one other thing: Could you bring food tubes to the people at the next table?"

"Right away, sir."

The Futuroids gave Joe a blink of gratitude, then lowered their shining heads to gaze hungrily at their plates of celery and rice.

Artemesia began to cry.

"Hey," said Joe. "Why are you crying?"

She tried to dry her face with her napkin but as fast as she wiped the old tears off her cheeks new tears would well up into her eyes. "It's because I'm so happy," she said, but of course that wasn't the real reason. The real reason was because she was looking at Joe in his fire-engine red suit and thinking that after they had tasted their wine they would fall into a swoon and when they woke they would neither of them remember anything about each other. It would all be as though it had never been—the Tournament, their few moments together at her home, their dream ballet, his face as it was now in the candlelight.

"Being happy is no reason to cry," said Joe.

"It's being so happy and wanting"—she swallowed the lump in her throat—"wanting that happiness to go on."

"And that's just what it's doing. I mean, we've both packed in a whole lot of excitement for one day, and . . ." He was going to say ". . . and it isn't even midnight yet," but that made him think of Alecto's decree that he would have to be married by midnight—married to Coughdrop if no other bride was forthcoming by that hour.

It was five to twelve.

Should I ask her now? Joe asked himself. Somehow the situation didn't seem romantic enough yet. He wondered if this rule of marriage-by-midnight was a genuine rule that had to be obeyed or just something Alecto had made up to suit her own convenience. What if midnight came and Coughdrop appeared and he just told her flatly that he wasn't going to marry her? Why did Sureworld Forest have such rules, and why did he still feel caught inside those rules even here outside the forest's wall?

To you and me those might seem easy questions to answer. Of course, we could explain to Joe, there's no rule that says you have to marry Coughdrop, or anyone else, before the stroke of twelve. It's all in your head. But don't we all have rules in *our* heads that would strike outside observers as just as unnecessary and just as ridiculous? Don't we all go on obeying them because, so we keep telling ourselves, *those are the rules*? Sometimes we don't even know what the rules are that we're obeying. We just obey them the way a soldier obeys a drill sergeant's orders, turning to the left when he shouts "Left!" and to the right when he shouts "Right!"

So if Joe wasn't thinking quite clearly, it's not really

his fault. He'd been through a lot that day, and now the sudden fear that Artemesia's reason for breaking into tears was because she knew he was going to ask her to marry him and knew, too, that she would say no—a fear that was not entirely off target—that fear had come to Joe's soul like a burglar returning to burgle your apartment for a second time, and *this* time he means to strip it bare—socks, canned goods, shopping coupons, old letters, the dirty clothes in the clothes hamper, and the clothes hamper itself. Everything. There you would be in your empty room with nothing but the rectangular ghosts of the pictures that used to be on the walls, of the rugs that used to be on the floor. That's how empty Joe's future looked if Artemesia were to have no part in it.

"Please," he said, reaching across the table and taking her hand. "Please don't leave me. I'll always love you. Don't ever leave me—please!"

All the while Artemesia kept on crying. Joe watched the tears sliding down the curves of her cheeks to her chin and remembered how the poor lobster had begged in just the same way not to be cooked. It dawned on him that being in love was not the solution to all of life's problems, that some of those problems just went on being unsolvable.

Life, he thought, and though the thought wasn't developed much beyond that, it seemed large and full of contradictory elements, rather like the First National Municipal Parking Lot across the street.

"Life!" he said aloud in a tone that said all that and a bit more.

"Life," Artemesia agreed, drying her eyes with her napkin and smiling.

"I think that wine has probably had long enough to breathe, don't you?" Joe poured the blood-red wine into her glass and then into his, which in a high-class restaurant like the Parking Lot Cafe is something you're supposed to let the waiter do for you, though of course Joe knew none of those rules.

He lifted his glass toward Artemesia and offered the toast of his smile.

Artemesia snuffled up the phlegm her crying jag had unclogged, took a deep breath, and matched Joe smile for smile and glass for glass. There was a delicate *ting* as the crystal brims touched.

"To us," said Joe, moving the wine glass to his lips.

"No!" She dropped her own glass and grabbed the stem of his so violently that it snapped like a wishbone, leaving the bottom of the glass in his hand and the top half with its untasted hemisphere of wine in hers.

"No," she repeated in a tone, almost, of calmness, "I won't forget you. I love you too much. Whatever comes of it, we'll have the memory." With grave deliberation she poured the wine from the broken glass over the already spattered tablecloth.

Before Joe—and the other diners at the Parking Lot Cafe—had had time properly to be amazed at this outburst, a still more amazing outburst followed on its heels, as Coughdrop, who had been concealed all this while beneath the adjoining table at which the two Futuroids were seated, burst out from under the tablecloth with a

cry of sorrow, rage, and a determination not to let herself be upstaged.

"O grief profound!" lamented the lady dwarf, reaching up on tiptoe to grasp the half-empty bottle of Chateau Léthé-Rothschild. "Now for me—*forlorn*, deformed wretch that I am—only *d***th* can offer an end to pain, to guilt, to lack of love, and every other torment I have merited. Come then, O *D***th*, I welcome thee!"

She took a long swallow from the bottle, leaving only the silty dregs of the wine swirling within its green-glass abyss. The bottle fell from her tiny disfigured hands and splashed the carpet and one or two bystanders who had gathered to hear her peroration.

"Now am I dead," she declaimed. "Already I feel the deadly drug at work within my laboring heart—the drug with which I'd thought to murder you. And why? For love? No, for wrath and vanity, envy and pride. O fatal equity. Behold, a greater love than I have ever known hath made a mockery of all my deep-laid contriving. Heeding not her own career and family pride, nor yet regardless of her fear to know anew the pain of love, my rival showed a magnanimity that hath reprieved not only memory of love but very life for both of them. How fitting, then, that I should die by the venom I had meant for them."

"Oh, were the novel to be written

Of another biter bitten,

I could wish my name were in it.

Reader, linger here a minute:

Coughdrop with her final breath

Would have you contemplate her . . . death!"

With those sad words, among which the letter S did not once rise up, like a snake from the grass, to detract from the solemnity of the occasion, Coughdrop collapsed upon the restaurant's Acrilan carpet, folded her hands over the bodice of her dimid dress, closed her eyes, and waited for the poisoned wine to work its cruel justice.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Stroke of Twelve

"What did that waiter say to you?" Artemesia asked, when Coughdrop's body had been carried away and the gathering of curiosity seekers had been dispersed back to their tables.

"He said we shouldn't be upset—Coughdrop's not going to die."

"Why not? How would he know?"

"He made me promise not to repeat what he said, 'cause the restaurant might get in trouble."

Artemesia began to protest: "How could—"

"How could I ever keep a secret from you? I couldn't. I told him that, so he asked me to ask you not to let it get any farther. But you might feel that's not fair, being asked to keep a secret that you don't know what it's going to be."

"Oh, Joe, don't keep insisting me. Of course I'll keep it a secret, whatever it is. What is it?"

"Well, you see, the restaurant has this arrangement with a liquor store around the corner that when someone comes in with a cash write—one that costs a lot—the waiter takes it back to the kitchen and quick steams off the label. Then he puts the label on a bottle of odd rary wine, which is what they bring to your table, and then the next day they put the label back on the first bottle and take it back to the liquor store, where it gets sold over again, and they split the profit. So the wine you spilled and Coughdrop drank the rest of was just the usual house red, which, as the waiter's words, is a little rough but hasn't killed anyone yet."

"What a wicked scam!" said Artemesia.

"Yeah, but a lucky thing for Coughdrop. Let's hope she's learned her lesson. What I still don't quite understand is why you didn't want me to drink the wine. You didn't know it was poisoned, did you?"

Artemesia blushed, but before she could explain the conflicting emotions that had led to her purchase of the bottle of Chateau Lethe-Rothschild, she was brought up short by the familiar drawling accent of Aunt Coccapuff.

"Fah! like: fancy ribbons, fortune cookies," crooned the lady robot. "Who'll hah mah wanes?"

"Fortune cookies?" exclaimed Artemesia impatiently.

"We haven't even had an egg roll yet."

"Ah, beg your pardon, Ah am sure," said Aunt Coccapuff contently. "She had begun to trundle away when Joe reached out and deactivated her."

"Artemesia!" he protested in a whisper. "She's your aunt!"

"Joe, darling, there are something like four thousand Aunt Coccapuffs in intimacy, and at least half of them are trying to sell something. If I let every one of them bully me into buying whatever trash they're peddling—"

"It's only a fortune cookie. Don't you want to know your fortune?"

"Oh, very well."

Joe reactivated the lady robot and said, "We'll have one fortune cookie."

"Will it be for the lady or for the gentleman?" Aunt Coccapuff asked sweetly.

"For the lady. I've already had my fortune told today."

Aunt Coccapuff dug into her basket of ribbons, lace and fortune cookies and extracted a single, somewhat chipped cookie and presented it to Artemesia.

Artemesia put it beside her plate.

"Mah mah, such composure," Aunt Coccapuff commented archly. "Ah'd be dishing to see what it said inside if it were mah fortune."

With a subversive sigh, Artemesia broke open the cookie, took out the little chip of paper it contained, and read her fortune aloud:

"With K, D, S, and F deleted,
Your happiness will be completed."

"Whatever in the world that may mean," said Aunt Coccapuff. "Ah, don't begin to guess."

"If it means anything at all," Artemesia tried to seem unconcerned, though clearly the fortune cookie's mysterious message had unsettled her. No one likes to be befuddled by a fortune cookie.

"Can I see that?" asked Joe, holding out his hand for the slip of paper.

Artemesia handed him her fortune and he read it over to himself very slowly. Then he started to smile. First it was just a crinkle at the corner of his mouth. Then it was the genuine happy-to-be-alive article, and finally it was the broadest of know-it-all grins.

"Ah, think," said Aunt Coccapuff—"that your escort has solved the riddle!"

"I think I have," said Joe, "and I can even show you what your fortune cookie is talking about, if it's all right for me to take my shirt off here in the restaurant."

"Well, if they can," said Artemesia. "I don't see why you shouldn't be able to."

She was referring to the Futurists at the next table, who had been supplied with food tubes and were now zealously running boiled celery and brown rice into each other's stomachs, for which purpose they had been obliged to spread open the front panels of their bodicores.

"Now you'll see," said Joe, sliding out of the pocket of his Brandname suit "why I got a little worried when I thought your name might be Abertene instead of Artemesia. You may remember my explaining, after the Tournament, how I learned to read from the four signs at the crossroads, and how all the letters from those signs were scrambled around to make the three words in the heart."

"I remember," said Artemesia.

Joe unclipped his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, and spread it open to expose the bandage over his leftso. "If you take the four letters that it says on your fortune cookie from the three words in the heart, then what's left is"—he gnawed his teeth at a big smile and ripped off the bandage—"I Love Art."

These in the foremost of the arrow-pierced pair of hearts that Herzzebebe had tattooed over Joe's heart were the words Joe had just spoken: I LOVE ART.

"I would have had your whole name tattooed there," Joe explained, "but for one thing I wasn't completely sure how to spell it, and for another it was such a long name, however it was spelled, that Tarantula Jack said the letters would have to be too small to read if they were all squeezed into a normal-sized heart. So we figured this would do for a nickname. I hope you don't mind."

Artemesia shook her head, and tried to say no, she didn't mind, but she couldn't bring out the words. She was too choked up.

"Why are you crying now?" Joe asked.

"Because," she sniffled, "my happiness has been completed."

"Did it hurt?" Aunt Coccapuff asked, bending over Joe's chest to have a closer look at the tattoo.

"That is the polite question you're supposed to ask about a tattoo that someone shows you, and Joe replied with the polite answer: "A little."

"Well, mah dear," said Aunt Cocopuff, turning to Artemesia. "Ah have never seen a fortune cookie come true quahst so quickly. That will be twenty-fahiv thousand dollars, plus eight and one-quarter percent cookie tax . . ." She tapped out the figures on the back of her left hand. "It comes to twenty-seven thousand sixty-two dollars and fifty cents. Without gratuity. Ah accept all major credit cards."

Suddenly Joe remembered what no one should forget who orders dinner in a restaurant. He remembered that he'd forgotten his credit card, which was still in the credit console in the hole in the trunk of the tree where Alec-to, the Witch of Decency, had inserted it after she'd told his fortune in Chapter Four, and where—Joe intensely hoped—it had remained ever since.

"Oh-oh," said Joe.

"Is something wrong?" asked Artemesia.

"I left my credit card back in Surewould Forest."

At once Aunt Cocopuff's credit-default alarm was triggered. Her siren began to hoot and lights to flash from her rapidly revolving head. Simultaneously a hook rose up from the back of Joe's chair and grappled the collar of the jacket of his Brandname suit. The Futuroids at the next table, whose alarm at Coughdrop's suicide attempt had been smoothed over by the maitre d's assurance that the lady dwarf was a cabaret performer, swiveled sideways in their seats and applauded Aunt Cocopuff's unremitting clamor. In this case, they were genuinely enjoying her performance, which bore a close resemblance to the art songs of the Martian Arcadian theatre, in which singers imitated the sounds and movements of traditional arcade games.

At last the credit manager appeared, flanked by two arresting officers from the Metropolitan Credit Police. "What seems to be the problem here?" he asked, flicking the switch in the cleavage of Aunt Cocopuff's gown that stilled the hooting and the flashing lights, though her head continued by its own momentum to spin for some time.

Joe explained his problem.

The credit manager was very sympathetic. He said it would only take a moment to establish a computer link with the credit office of Surewould Forest, and if Joe's card was indeed where he said it was, and if his credit balance was sufficient, then there should be no problem. Meanwhile, he hoped they were enjoying their dinner.

"I hope we will too," said Joe, "when it comes."

The credit manager made a snippy little bow, and the two arresting officers glowered. Aunt Cocopuff's head came to a stop in the opposite direction from her upper torso. All four of them had just gone off, when Loser appeared with their dinner.

"This is the lobster," Loser explained, tapping the cover of one of the two dishes. "And"—tapping the other—"this is the Lo Mein. I have to explain that the Lo Mein is only plain Lo Mein, because the kitchen is fresh out of tuna fish."

"That's okay," said Joe. "I've got a can of tuna right here in my hat."

He bent forward to reach into his stovepipe hat, but

was prevented by the hook in the collar of his jacket, which the credit manager had forgotten to ungrapple before he went away.

It was at just that moment that the gigantic clock at the back of the restaurant began to chime the hour of midnight. Everyone in the restaurant laid down his, her, or its chopsticks or cutlery or feed tube rammer and counted the chimes of the clock. At the stroke of twelve a curtain parted and, just as Joe had dreaded, Coughdrop reappeared, wearing a crown and a waist-length crimson cape and carrying the unsheathed Golden Ruler before her.

"Thtop everything!" Coughdrop commanded. Quite needlessly, for everything had already stopped.

"Midnight hath thruck, and *you*"—pointing the Golden Ruler square at Joe's chest—"are not yet wed to another, I thee. Therefore I have come to claim you ath *my* huthband, according to the Munithipal Codeth of Innathity and the thovereign decreeth of the Golden Ruler."

SHE HAS SPOKEN! boomed a deep, godlike voice from everywhere at once. The Golden Ruler vibrated like a struck tuning fork and glowed with a strange light.

"Pause there, Morocco," said Artemesia, rising to her feet and confronting her rival across the hushed restaurant.

Joe had no idea what she'd meant by "Pause there, Morocco," having never read or seen *The Merchant of Venice*, nor if he had would it have helped much, since the situation in Shakespeare is completely different. Artemesia just liked the sound of it, "Pause there, Morocco," and it did serve the immediate purpose of stopping Coughdrop momentarily in her tracks.

"Thepeak your piethe, huthy—and then leave uhy. Unleth you would like to be a wineth to our nupthialth."

"Fond girl, desist. Does not your own heart inform you that love can never be coerced?"

"I'll coerthe you, you thtuck-up b'tch! He'th mine, tho hand him over!"

Artemesia went and stood beside Joe, who remained seated thanks to the clamp in his collar, and placed her hand in his. "You're too late, Coughdrop. Don't you see? Joe's asked me to be his wife . . . and I've accepted."

"What!" said Joe. "When? Hey! Thanks."

"It'sh you who are too late," Coughdrop replied haughtily. "The hour'th patht when your acthepnanthe could have mattered. Midnight hath thruck; he ith not wed; he'th mine!"

SHE HAS SPOKEN! boomed the godlike voice again, but this time no one paid it much attention except the three people immediately concerned. People come to restaurants, after all, to eat.

The unearthly glow was just fading from the Golden Ruler when the credit manager returned, no longer flanked by arresting officers, to inform Joe that a computer link with Surewould Forest had been established and that everything was okay.

"Then how about taking this clamp off my collar?" Joe suggested.

"Allow me," said the credit manager. He undid the hook, which retraced into the chair.

"Thank you," said Joe.
"Oh, I forgot—there's also *this*." The credit manager placed two slips of paper on the tablecloth beside Joe's plate. "This came through on our printer during the linkup. Apparently you didn't receive your printout at the point of purchase."

"Thank you," Joe said again.

The credit manager continued to linger by the table, as though expecting a tip.

"What'th thith, then?" Coughdrop demanded, rushing forward and grabbing one of the slips of paper. "Oh ho! It'th the fortune my poor thainted mother read in hith palm. Lithen:

By midnight tonight,
O doughty knight,
You'll give Mith Right
Your troth in plith.

You know what that meanth, don't you? It meanth *you'll* marry me. You're the doughty knight, and I'm Mith Right." "Not according to the Ding-dong Singalong Song," Joe reasoned.

"What doeth the Ding-dong Thingalong Thong have to do with anything?"

Joe cleared his throat and sang:

"Doo-dah, Ding-dong,
Learn the lesson of our song:
If white is right then black is wrong.
Doo-dah, Ding-dong."

The Futuroids applauded politely and returned to their dinner.

"So," said Joe, "if white is right, then it follows from that that Miss White is Miss Right."

Artemesia nodded her head vigorously. "Nothing could be clearer."

"No, no, no, no, no!" argued Coughdrop. "The thong thayth *if*. *If* ith ith right. But it ithn't. White ith *not* right, and *sbe* ith not Mith Right. I'm Mith Right, and you muht marry *me*. Right now! Midnight hath thtruck, and that'th the rule, and *thith* ith the Ruler."

She held up the Golden Ruler, which gave off a faint glow and repeated, though at a less than godlike decibel level: SHE HAS SPOKEN! Coughdrop looked at the Ruler with annoyance and rapped it against the edge of the table. "I think it needth new batterith," she murmured.

"What does the other part of your fortune say?" Artemesia asked Joe, trying to sound casual and unconcerned.

"Nothing that ever made any sense," said Joe. "But maybe it will to you." He picked up the slip of paper and slowly read the verses of the prophecy aloud, pausing mentally before the harder words before pronouncing them, since he very much wanted to impress Artemesia with his reading skills:

"When the captive hour's free,
When the ruler, um, cedes the . . . um . . ."

"The word is 'reign,'" said the credit manager officiously. He was still hovering over their table expecting a tip. "In the sense of a king's reign, though of course it might as easily be 'rain' in the sense of precipitation. Computers can't distinguish between homophones in such ambiguous contexts."

"Mm-hm," said Joe.

"If it were 'rain' in a precipitative sense," the credit manager went on, "then instead of 'cedes' with a C, it could be 'seeds' with an S, though really that is a little far-fetched, isn't it? How would a ruler go about seeding with an S the rain with an A-I?"

"No!" Coughdrop shrieked. "No! No! No! No!"

"Is something wrong?" asked the credit manager.

"It ithn't tho! It'th 'thedeth' with a thee, not 'theedth' with an eth."

"That's just what I was saying, my dear young lady. Airplanes or pilots may be said to seed the rain, but not rulers. Rulers cede their reigns; that's to say, they relinquish their power."

"Never!" Coughdrop declared. "I will never thede my reign. All thothe thingth in the prophethy are thingth that will never happen."

"Like the witches' prophecies in *Macbeth*?" Artemesia inquired sweetly.

Coughdrop replied with a look of mingled horror and hatred.

"I don't understand what this is all about," said Joe.

"What it'th about, thtupid, ith the fact that when I thaw the two of you tonight flying about like a pair of thwallowth, I uthed *thith*!"—she struck Joe over the head with the Golden Ruler—"to theed the rain. I'd forgotten thothe vertheth. I only wanted to thpoil Mith Thtuck-up'th fanthy cohtume. What a nuithanthe. Let me thee what elthe it thayth on that thilly thlip of paper."

Joe was too quick for her. He held the printout up beyond the reach of Coughdrop's grasping fingers and read aloud the next couplet:

"When from forth the riven tree
Issue lobsters and Lo Mein."

"Why, that's just what we ordered for dinner tonight," Artemesia pointed out.

"And it was paid for by a credit card that had been left inside a tree," the credit manager observed. "Though whether the tree was riven I couldn't say."

"What's 'riven' mean?" Joe asked.

"Split in two."

"Then it's that tree, all right. 'Cause that's what happened to it when I read the words in the heart: a big bolt of lightning hit the tree and it was riven."

Coughdrop scowled. "I have a theaking thtupicion that thingth are not going my way."

Joe stared at the printout as though the pressure of his attention might squeeze a meaning out of the first line of the prophecy. He read it aloud again:

"When the captive hour's free . . ."

"Why, that would be tonight, of course!" said the credit manager. "I'd forgotten all about it." He began to fiddle with the stem of his watch. "Thank you for reminding me."

"Of what?" asked Joe.

"Of the fact that tonight marks the end of Daylight Savings Time. I have to set all the clocks in the restaurant back one hour."

Coughdrop made a strangling sound.

"You mean it isn't really midnight yet?" Joe asked.

"Not for almost another hour."

Joe and Artemesia exchanged a look that without their either moving a muscle was as though they were waltzing again.

Coughdrop, for her part, behaved with surprising dignity. She didn't scream or stamp her feet or otherwise attempt a tantrum. Her shoulders sagged, and her face took on an expression of agonizing self-pity. You couldn't help feeling sorry for her. At least Joe couldn't.

"Hey, cheer up. You tried your best—that's what counts." When that didn't do the trick, he added, "Things could be worse."

"I don't thee how," Coughdrop replied morosely. "All that I've ever longed for hath been denied me. The reth of my life will be a barren wateland. Even my thintier attempt at thuthide hath been pathed off ath a cabaret act, a jetth for the thport of people more interethed in a plate of telery and rithe than in the thorrow of a thoul thwarted by a cruel Dethtiny."

"Speaking of dinner," said Artemesia, "perhaps you'd like to join us at the table. There's more than enough, and I'm sure the waiter could find another chair."

"Ath a matter of fact, I am thtarving." She signaled to the ever-attentive Loser. "Thee if you can find a kiddy'th highchair thomewhere."

Loser bowed and went away and almost at once was back with a highchair, which Coughdrop refused all assistance in mounting. "Oh, yeth, I need an ashtray too, if you pleathe."

Loser made a little bow and went off for an ashtray.

"Now let's thee what we have here for dinner." She peeked under the cover of one of the dishes. "Lobhtter! Oh, I love lobhtter. And what's thith?"

"It's Tuna Lo Mein," said Artemesia, "without the tuna."

"Oh," said Joe. "I forgot about that. I was just going to get that out of my hat when the clock struck twelve." He bent down, rummaged through his stovepipe hat, and produced the 6½-ounce can of Pigeon o' the Sea Chunk Style Tuna Fish that the Goddess Fortuna had given him as a special premium for singing the Pigeon o' the Sea jingle back in Chapter Eight.

"You wouldn't have a can opener, would you?" Joe asked Artemesia.

She shook her head.

"Give it to me," said Coughdrop. "My Ruler hath a th-pleated blade juth for opening canth."

Joe gave the can to Coughdrop, who dug out the Ruler's concealed can-opening blade with her fingernail. Then she inserted the blade into the can of tuna and—

WOUGHSH!

—a dense cloud of blue-green vapor issued from the tiny puncture.

Coughdrop let loose a piercing scream and hastily pressed the smoking can of tuna fish upon Joe. "It's my mother!" she babbled, wide-eyed with terror. "She's returned from the grave! Oh, I knew I should have left her cape in the closet!"

The blue-green vapor formed a hazy wreath in the air above the table. A face began to materialize within the wreath.

Coughdrop put down her Golden Ruler on the table and fumbled desperately with the hinged tray of the highchair, which had automatically locked in place, one of the special safety features of the Parking Lot Cafe's highchairs. "It wathn't my fault, Mother, it wath an acth-dent, the acth thlipped, you muthn't blame me!"

The face, when it finally came into focus inside the smoky wreath, wasn't Alecto's face but the much prettier and friendlier face of the Goddess Fortuna from the ad on tv.

"Congratulations," the Goddess declared in a bubbling, underwatery voice, speaking to Joe. "I am the Goddess Fortuna, and I have chosen you, the opener of this special 'Wishbone' edition of Pigeon o' the Sea Chunk Style Tuna Fish, as the lucky winner of this month's Grand Prize. Just whisper your fondest wish into the can, eat one delicious morsel of my tuna, and your wish will come true."

"That's not fair!" Coughdrop cried out. "Give me that can back. I wath the one who opened it, tho the wish ith mine."

"Ready?" the Goddess demanded.

"No! Not yet! Don't juth thith there thmiling like an idiot—give me that can. Oh, where ith that Ruler? I'll wipe the thmile off hith fathe. He'll be thorry he ever heard the name of Surewould Foretht. Where ith my Ruler? Hath thomeone taken my Ruler?"

"I have the Golden Ruler," said Artemesia calmly, "and I declare, by the power vested in me by this Ruler, that Joe shall have *his* fondest wish come true, and that's that. It was *his* can of tuna, as you know very well."

"But it wath *me* who opened it!"

"Hey, listen," said Joe, "there's no need to argue. My fondest wish *has* come true. I'm going to be marrying you, Artemesia. What could I wish for fonder than that? And Coughdrop's right—she was the one who opened the can. So—here." He handed the can of tuna to Coughdrop. "Make a wish."

"But what if she wishes . . ." Artemesia began anxiously.

"For me?" said Joe. "She wouldn't. I doubt marriage was ever very high on her list of priorities."

"Are you *ready*?" the Goddess Fortuna demanded again, in a tone of mild impatience.

"Yeth, yeth, juth let me think. Okay . . . lithen." She whispered into the can and then pressed her lips against the punctured lid and sucked for all she was worth.

"Your wish has been granted," declared the Goddess, whereupon, like a lovely perfume that you smell for just a moment on the street before it isn't there, she vanished.

Coughdrop looked about wonderingly, as though searching for some clear proof that the Goddess had spoken truly. "Can it be? Am I rid of my terrible impediment? Dare I make the great . . ."—she closed her eyes and pronounced the word—" . . . experiment?"

She opened her eyes and said the word again, more confidently: "Experiment. Yes! It's gone, my lip is gone, I can pronounce the letter S as well as anyone else in the world. Listen to me, just listen: Sweet! Sweet are the uses of adversity! At last! At last I'll be able to take a responsible position at the store."

"What store is that?" asked Joe politely.

"The C & C Store. All my life that's what I've wanted to do—to sell C & C Cola at the C & C Store, the one by the seashore. Of course, it won't be just ordinary C & C Cola." Coughdrop chuckled. "It will be ensorceled C & C, and the men who drink it will turn to swine! And they will have to live in sties, and they will have to guess my name in order to become human again."

"That's not a very nice wish," Joe commented.

"Well, I never promised you a rose garden, did I?"

"And what is the name that they will have to guess?" Artemesia asked.

"You think you're so smart—you guess."

"Circe?"

"Too obvious. No."

Artemesia furrowed her brow. "Could it be . . . Sybil?"

"Sybil is a pretty name, but you're wrong again. You have only one more guess."

Artemesia bit her lip, and Joe chewed on his napkin, and Coughdrop chewed at the tip of her supernumerary finger.

"I know!" said Artemesia. She folded her hands together and placed them neatly on the edge of the table as though they were the trophy for her correct answer. "Cecily Stiltskin!"

In the shock of that moment Coughdrop bit down on the fingertip she'd been chewing at. The bitten finger began to emit a loud hissing sound, like the shrillest of teakettles or like a gigantic letter S. As the hissing continued, Coughdrop's limbs, confined within the high-chair, flailed about wildly. Her face began to pucker and shrivel. She opened her mouth to scream, and the hissing sound became momentarily louder. Finally, all the air inside her had emptied itself out, and there was nothing left but a thin, limp, wet membrane like the skin of a burst balloon.

Loser returned to the table with the ashtray.

Artemesia picked up what was left of the lady dwarf and dropped it into the ashtray.

Loser gave a little bow and went off with the ashtray.

"What do you think you'll do with the Golden Ruler?" Joe asked Artemesia.

"Is it mine now?" she asked in turn.

"I suppose so. Don't you want it?"

"Not really. Do you?"

"No, I wouldn't know what to do with it."

"I'll tell you what. Why don't we give it to my father? He's always been so ineffectual, and that's what one looks for in an authority figure. He can bumble around

in Surewould Forest and officiate at banquets, and deliver speeches, and never do the least real bit of harm. It will be as though he were still a figurehead for General Items. He'll be happy."

"And so will we," said Joe confidently. "But you know—there's one thing I still don't understand, and that's the last part of this printout, where it says:

Then shall Joe Palooka be
The Prince of Aquitaine.

I mean, for one thing, my name is not Palooka. And for another, where is Aquitaine, and why should I be prince of it?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

Prince Joe

"I think I can answer both those questions," said an oddly muffled voice.

The Futuroids stood up from their table, reached up to grasp the fleshy wattles under their chins, and *peeled off their faces* with a gritty rasp of Velcro. Beneath those masks stood revealed the human faces of Boniface Bonifacio and his chief yesman.

"To answer the easy question first," said B.B., "Aquitaine is a new soft drink soon to be released in seven key test markets."

"It's a whole new concept in soft drinks," said the yesman enthusiastically. "It's not just caffeine-free and sugar-free—it's *taste*-free. The jingle for it goes like this:

For sparkle pure and flavor plain
As water from a well,
Try General Fluids' Aquitaine
In liquid or in gel."

"And," B.B. went on, "the beauty part is this: the whole campaign is going to be tied to the release of *The Fairies' Toybox*."

"In which *you*"—the yesman tapped Joe right on the sorest part of his tattoo—"are going to play the Prince of Aquitaine."

"This must be a dream," said Joe.

"In a way, yes," the yesman agreed. "But it's a dream that's already on the road to fulfillment. At this moment the United Avatars Legal Department is completing the paperwork changing your last name from Doe to Palooka."

"What will I have to do in the movie?" Joe asked.

"Smile," said B.B. "Just smile."

"Truly," said the yesman, "the Prince's role is small. The part was something of an afterthought by the Product Placement Department. But it's a good way to get your name out before the public in advance of your first *starring* role."

"And what's that going to be?"

"The title role in *L-5, Lord of the Elf-Hive*," B.B. said, plunking a United Avatars contract down on Joe's dinner plate. "Just put your John Hancock on the dotted line, and you'll be a superduperstar before you can say Ja—"

"May I see that?" Artemesia asked, interrupting the movie mogul.

"Sure," said Joe. He handed her the contract.

"Now just one minute!" B.B.'s manner was suddenly less jovial. "That contract is a confidential matter between Mr. Palooka and United Avatars."

"As Mr. Palooka's *manager*, I want to be certain that he doesn't sign anything tonight that he may regret in the morning. Such as this phrase limiting Mr. Palooka's first year's earnings to ten million dollars a week."

"Ten million dollars a week? Wow, that's ten times what I can earn delivering pizzas."

"But it's marginally less than I earn as a receptionist, third-grade. So I *think*, Mr. Bonifacio, that Joe will hold off signing anything until we've had a chance to discuss more equitable terms."

"What do *you* think, Palooka?" asked the mogul gruffly.

"Oh, I'll do whatever she says." He smiled a smile of pure adoration. "She's my manager."

Shall I stop there? As the mogul and his yesman say good-night, and Joe and Artemesia finally get to eat their dinner? Or would you rather keep the narrative going a while longer, just to be safe? Till they've had their kumquats for dessert, and paid the bill, and taxied back to Surewould Forest and officially checked out? Would you rather wait to see them reunited after they've turned in their entertainment pins and returned to the real world? Do you want to hear more of the details about Joe's contract with United Avatars? Are you afraid that all this happy ending might be, as Joe said, just a dream, and that when the dream is over Artemesia won't want to marry him, or even go on another date, and that Joe's career as a superduperstar is nothing but a fantasy that he paid for with the price of his admission into Surewould Forest?

The choice, reader, is yours.

Of course, in a literal sense, it's mine too—in the sense that I can actually describe the moment when Joe sees Artemesia coming out the exit from Surewould For-

est and he smiles as he waits for her to spot him in the crowd. And then she does and smiles back, and then, of course, they're locked in a happy embrace, and he asks again, "Will you marry me?" just to hear her say again, "Yes I said yes I will. Yes."

But whether you believe that ending is the sense in which the choice has to be yours. Because you have only my word that that is what happened, and I might be fobbing you off with a happy ending that didn't really happen, knowing that it's what you wanted to hear. There are writers who'd do that.

I'm not like that, actually, and so it's a needless worry. Joe and Artemesia did get back together in the real world, the one we all live in, and they did get married that same night before the second stroke of twelve, and Joe did play the role of the Prince of Aquitaine, and later he did star in *L-5, Lord of the Elf-Hive*, and it was, as *Variety* predicted, an enormous success, though not nearly so enormous as the success of the movie that was to provide Joe with his greatest role—which, as you may already have guessed, was the role of Joe Doe in the story of his own life, *A Troll of Surewould Forest*.

And now, just as in the final frames of that movie, Joe and Artemesia embrace. Their lips meet in a passionate kiss, and the dream-ballet waltz swells up in the orchestra grander than ever, and then, as the camera starts to draw back, a black circle irises closed around them, and in the blackness that's left you see the United Avatars logo, and then, under that, it says The End, and you know that the story is finally all over but you go on looking at those two words for as long as the music continues.



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